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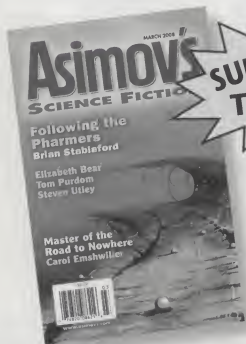
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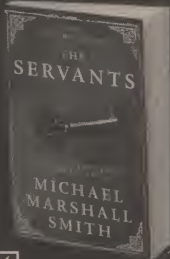
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## THE 2009 DELL MAGAZINES AWARD

Once again, I left the wintry north on a Thursday in mid-March for sunny Orlando, Florida, to bestow the Dell Magazine Award for Undergraduate Excellence in Science Fiction and Fantasy Writing on a lucky winner. The award is co-sponsored by Dell Magazines and the International Association for the Fantastic and is supported by the School of Mass Communications, University of South Florida. The Dell Magazines Award is conferred, along with certificates to the runners up and honorable mentions, at the International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts. This year marked the thirtieth anniversary of the conference and I was amazed to discover that I had been giving out the award for more than half of them.

Although my co-judge, Rick Wilber, and I choose the stories from a blind read, we were delighted to learn that this year's winner, Josh Eure, is a creative writing student of the (soon-to-be) two-time Nebula Award-winning author, John Kessel, at North Carolina State University. Josh, who already holds a traditional author's resume that includes stints as a rock-wall bayer and a hammock weaver, as well as jobs in fast food, on a seed farm, and fueling aircraft, will be continuing on in the university's graduate writing program this fall. On Saturday evening, I presented him with the award and a check for five hundred dollars for his story "We Were Real." This compelling tale of the not-too-distant future introduces us to a powerful and distinctive new voice. Josh's story will appear online next year. In the meantime, please check out *asimovs.com* for last year's hilarious award-winning story "Blank, White, and Blue," by Stephen Leech.

This year's first runner-up and the author of "The Best and Bitt'rest Kiss,"

Sarah Miller, is a senior at Bard College at Simon Rock. Sarah majored in psychology and linguistics, and is a graduate of the Clarion Writers Workshop and the Alpha SF, Fantasy and Horror Workshop for Young Writers—a workshop for teenagers in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Last year, Sarah received an honorable mention in the contest, and she was accompanied to Florida this year by her friend, and another of last year's honorable mentions, Emily Tersoff.

Maggie Morgan, our second runner-up with her story, "Suspended," is another of John Kessel's students at NCSU. Unfortunately, Maggie, along with three of our honorable mentions, could not be in attendance at the conference. One of the missing was Rahul Kanakia of Stanford University. Rahul, a 2007 finalist as well, was recognized this year for his story "Between Dusk and Twilight." A fellow Stanford student, Jennette Westwood, received a certificate for "Locked and Keyed," while Elena Gleason of Knox College and an Alpha graduate was awarded an honorable mention for "Aeroplasty."

Happily, though, Lara Donnelly, a freshman at Wright State University, was on hand to pick up her certificate for "The Case of the Unassuming Book and the Very Soiled Trousers." Lara is also a graduate of the Alpha Workshop. I hope to learn something about the secret of Alpha's success when I attend it as a guest over the summer.

In addition to spending time in individual writing conferences with each of our finalists, I had the chance to catch up with Terry Bisson, Marie Brennan, Suzy McKee Charnas, Ted Chiang, Stephen R. Donaldson, Andy Duncan, Kathleen Ann Goonan, Daryl Gregory, Joe Haldeman, Elizabeth Hand, Judith Moffett, Patrick O'Leary, Kit Reed, Peter Straub, and a



Photo credit: Beth Gwinn

Left to right: Rick Wilber, Sarah Miller, Josh Eure, Lara Donnelly, and Sheila Williams.

number of other authors. I look forward to seeing many of them again next year.

*Asimov's* is proud to support these academic awards with IAFA. The International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts is a worldwide network of scholars, educators, critics, editors, publishers, and performers who share an interest in studying and celebrating the fantastic in all art forms, disciplines, and media.

We are actively looking for next year's winner. The deadline for submissions is Monday, January 2, 2010. All full-time undergraduate students at any accredited university or college are eligible. Stories must be in English, and should run from 1,000 to 10,000 words. No submission can be returned, and all stories must be previously unpublished and unsold. There is a \$10 entry fee, with up to three stories accepted for each fee paid. A special flat fee of \$25 is available for an entire classroom of writers. Instructors should send all the submissions in one or

more clearly labeled envelopes with a check or money order. Checks should be made out to the Dell Magazines Award. There is no limit to the number of submissions from each writer. Each submission must include the writer's name, address, phone number, and college or university on the cover sheet, but please do not put your name on the actual story.

Before entering the contest, contact Rick Wilber for more information, rules, and manuscript guidelines. He can be reached care of:

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Next year's winner will be announced at the 2010 Conference on the Fantastic, in the pages of *Asimov's Science Fiction* magazine, and on our website. ○



## BUILDING WORLDS: PART I

The job of the science fiction writer, like that of writers of any other sort of fiction, is telling stories, that is, inventing characters and placing them in dramatic opposition to one another. The special task of the SF writer, though, is to supply not only the drama but also the stage: to build the entire set upon which one's characters act out their conflicting purposes. And so we must create not merely characters and plots but entire worlds.

That sounds like a god-sized assignment, and in a sense it is. Of course, our worlds are merely things set down on paper, and that spares us the considerable trouble of producing actual mountains and seas, skies and deserts, and all the other tangibilities, down to microbes and algae, that real gods must traffic in. We deal in the illusion of creating worlds, not in the worlds themselves. Even so, the job has to be done right or the illusion won't hold.

I can name any number of examples of the job done right: Hal Clement's *Mesklin*, Frank Herbert's *Arrakis*, Brian Aldiss' *Helliconia*, James Blish's *Lithia*, Ursula K. Le Guin's *Gethen*, Anne McCaffrey's *Pern*, Harry Harrison's *Pyrrus*, Larry Niven's *Ringworld*, Stanislaw Lem's *Solaris*, and on and on, an infinity of fictional worlds having little in common except plausibility and unforgettability. But how is it done? What factors must you consider, what knowledge must you have?

The place to start, I think, must be the physical characteristics of the world to be created: its size and mass, the nature of its sun and the imaginary world's distance from it, its gravitational pull, its period of revolution and axial rotation, its orbital tilt, the makeup of its atmosphere, its biochemistry, and so forth. From these things all else inevitably follows.

Two of our greatest practitioners of this area of the art of creating imaginary worlds were Poul Anderson and Hal Clement. These two grand masters had the playfully speculative cast of mind that any science fiction writer must have, but also the benefit of scientific educations that were both deep and broad, particularly in the areas of physics and chemistry, and their work demonstrated a degree of accomplishment in those aspects of world-building that most of us can only hope to approach. Both are now gone from us, but it's our great fortune that each of them left valuable essays on their working methods: Anderson in "The Creation of Imaginary Worlds" and Clement in "The Creation of Imaginary Beings," both published in *Science Fiction, Today and Tomorrow* (1974), edited by Reginald Bretnor. I urge anyone interested in knowing how worlds are built to seek out these magisterial texts. The Bretnor book is long out of print but readily available via second-hand channels. Most of its fifteen chapters are still relevant to modern SF writers, but two, the Anderson and the Clement, remain essential reading today.

Anderson focuses quickly on the importance of consistency of scientific logic: writers who arbitrarily cobble together worlds built out of incompatible factors risk forfeiting, at least to the scientifically informed reader, their plausibility in all other sectors of their stories, those involving such things as character, emotional texture, plot. Giving the example of a planet that circles a blue-white sun and has an atmosphere of hydrogen and fluorine, Anderson says, "This is simply a chemical impossibility. Those two substances, under the impetus of that radiation, would unite promptly and explosively." Blue-white stars are too hot to be surrounded by inhabited planets of any



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sort: they burn so fiercely that they don't last long enough for planets to develop around them, let alone for life to evolve on those planets. He deals similarly with red giants, white dwarfs, variable stars, and other sorts of stellar bodies unsuitable for the creation of habitable worlds, pointing out the problems inherent in choosing such familiar stars as Sirius, Vega, Antares, or Mira as settings for stories. Those stars are familiar to us because they shine brightly in our own sky, but for half a dozen different reasons it is not the most luminous stars that will be found to have inhabited worlds. By running through the stations of the stellar temperature-luminosity chart, Anderson explains how to select (or invent) a star that would be likely to provide worlds useful to the storyteller. He does point out that any sufficiently ingenious writer can make use of any kind of star for story purposes: the thing to avoid is unknowingly to place your fictional world around a star that can't possibly have planets, or to postulate intelligent life on a world where no life of any sort could exist.

With these limitations having been invoked, Poul goes on to remind us that a planet's distance from its sun affects its climate, that its mass and size and density determine its gravitational pull, that the presence or absence of moons will control its tides, that the degree of axial tilt will shape its seasonal variations. "By bringing in this detail and that, tightly linked," Anderson says, "the writer makes his imaginary globe seem real. Furthermore, the details are interesting in their own right. . . . They may reveal something of the possibilities in these light-years that surround us, thereby awakening the much-desired sense of wonder."

He doesn't insist that the conception of a fictional world must be preceded by months of preliminary study, but only that a reasonable understanding of the laws of astrophysics will allow writers to convince their readers that they actually know what they're talking about, and will also help in the process of inventing the story itself: "Whatever value the

writer chooses [for a planet's axial tilt], let him ponder how it will determine the course of the year, the size and character of climatic zones, the development of life and civilizations. If Earth did travel upright, thus having no seasons, we would probably never see migratory birds across the sky. One suspects there would be no clear cycle of the birth and death of vegetation either. Then what form would agriculture have taken? Society? Religion?" He illustrates the Andersonian planning methods with diagrams and mathematical calculation, but there's nothing there, intimidating though it may look at a quick glance, that a would-be science fiction writer with at least a high school degree can't follow. (And if you aren't willing to think through a little bit of high school astronomy, what are you doing setting up shop as a science fiction writer?)

Though the Anderson essay is, in and of itself, a splendid little handbook for planetary creation, he recommends two classic reference books that remain invaluable to science fiction writers to this day: *Intelligent Life in the Universe* (1966) by I.S. Shklovskii and Carl Sagan and *Habitable Planets for Man* (1970) by Stephen H. Dole. I second the recommendations—those two have stood me in good stead for decades—and add to it *Cycles of Fire* (1987) by William K. Hartmann, *Red Giants and White Dwarfs* (1967) by Robert Jastrow, and *The Planetary System* (1988) by David Morrison and Tobias Owen, which, while dealing entirely with our own solar system, provides a wealth of fundamental information about why that solar system has the form it does, so that any writer can readily generalize new worlds from the data supplied.

The Clement essay that follows Poul Anderson's in the Bretnor book likewise stresses the merit of using rigorous logic, or at least common sense, in populating one's invented worlds with living creatures. One should know something about how earthly creatures work, Clement says, before dreaming up extraterrestrial ones, since the basic biological rules of our planet very likely will

hold true for any planet that is capable of bringing forth life. ("The trick of magnifying a normal creature to menacing size is all too common. The giant amoeba is a familiar example; monster insects, or whole populations of them, even more so. It might pay an author with this particular urge to ask himself why we don't actually have such creatures around. There is likely to be a good reason, and if he doesn't know it perhaps he should do some research.") He goes on to explain why Pegasus wouldn't be able to fly, why six-foot-long ants don't infest our gardens, and why birds don't travel at supersonic speeds; and, having done that, he then proceeds to demonstrate how, given a deep enough knowledge of planet-building, a writer can conjure up worlds and creatures capable of operating in contravention to all our own planet's rules. (The indispensable Shklovskii-Sagan volume, *Intelligent Life in the Universe*, has a particularly valuable chapter on the possibilities for life of a non-terrestrial sort in other solar systems.)

But, as I've said, working out the physical and biochemical characteristics of your invented world is just the starting point. Those characteristics will provide you with the setting for your story, but not the story itself, though in large measure they will govern the essential nature of that story. (The concerns of the thirsty desert-dwellers of Frank Herbert's parched Arrakis in *Dune* are quite different, for example, from those of the inhabitants of the completely aquatic Hydros in my own *The Face of the Waters*). Once you've determined your world's gravity, climate, geography, geology, natural history, etc., you need to work out the details of its culture, which will involve you in such matters as economics, politics, religion, and urban planning. Ideally all of this will grow out of the special physical characteristics of your invented world.

I'll talk next time about how I went about this phase of the process in creating my own best-known imaginary world, the planet Majipoor of *Lord Valentine's Castle* and its various companion volumes. ○

Lisa Goldstein's novelette, "Dark Rooms" (Asimov's, October/November 2007) was a recent finalist for the 2008 Nebula awards. She returns to our pages with an enigmatic tale about a young woman who must face the unknown to discover if she has what it takes to get . . .

# AWAY FROM HERE

Lisa Goldstein

I'm cleaning one of the vacant rooms when the bell over the front door rings. "Liz!" my mother yells from somewhere down the corridor. "Liz, could you get that?"

I'm almost done here, though, and I don't want to stop. I fluff up the pillows on the bed and go out to the corridor to get the vacuum cleaner, and I'm pushing it into the room when I see my mother heading toward me.

"Didn't I ask you to get the bell?" she says. "What's the matter with you? You know we can't afford to keep the guests waiting."

"I thought I'd finish—" I say.

"Right, and have them go to some other hotel. Remember those people who left because you weren't quick enough?"

"Oh, come on, that was a year ago," I say, but my mother doesn't stay to hear the rest of it. I head down the hall to the reception room, wondering if she's ever going to forget that one mistake.

Once I see the people waiting, though, everything she's said goes right out of my mind. They're like nothing I've ever seen at our hotel, and for a moment all I can do is goggle at them. The man in front is dressed in a top hat and a long shiny black jacket, and the woman next to him has on what looks like a costume from a marching band, with braids and epaulets and bars stretching across her coat; she looks sort of like she's wearing a xylophone. Another woman is dressed in a frilly pink dress and what I think is a feather boa around her neck, though I've never seen one in real life. They don't look silly, though—it's more like they're bringing some other part of the world inside with them, some larger part.

I go behind the counter. The group of people all head up toward me at once. There are only five of them, I realize—the three I mentioned and two men standing at the back, both dressed in identical gray three-piece suits, one very fat and the other very thin.

"Terrible weather we're having, isn't it?" I say. In fact I haven't been outside all day, but one of the guests told me it was about ninety degrees out there, and my father's big on making small talk.

"Better than nothing," the man in front says.

I open my mouth to ask the usual questions—what kind of room do you want, how long will you be staying—but I finally register what he's said. What the hell does *that* mean? I decide to ignore it and continue on.

"How many rooms would you like?" I ask.

Something moves in the man's jacket pocket, and I step back, startled. A mouse peeks out, its pink nose sniffing the air. "There's no—we don't allow pets in here," I say.

The mouse wiggles back down into the pocket. "What do you mean?" the man says.

"The mouse. In your pocket."

He pats his pocket. It's flat, nothing there. I have to laugh—I can't help it. My brother Bert used to practice magic tricks, though he was nowhere as good as this guy.

The mouse pokes its head out again. "Elmer!" the man says, looking chagrined. "I thought I told you to stay inside!"

"It's stuffy in there, boss." The mouse moves his top lip, showing his teeth—it really does look like he's talking.

I laugh again. "Are you playing somewhere around here?"

"Playing?" the man says. "We're playing right here."

"What?" I say, astonished.

He grins at me. "Playing around. Playing with words. Playing a game."

"No, I mean—" I try again. "Are you doing some kind of show?"

"Ah. No, just passing through. Passing through." I'm disappointed; I realize I'd been looking forward to seeing them perform. "Two rooms, if you please. The very largest this establishment has."

"And your smallest bed," the mouse says.

"You can't—" I say. I stop and think of my brother again. Before he left he disobeyed my parents more and more, so often I think they might have been happy to see him go. One of the last things he did was to give a room to a woman with a tiny yapping dog, who ended up biting my father in the leg when he went to clean the room. The dog, I mean, not the woman.

Usually I manage not to think of my brother at all, and now I've remembered him twice in the space of a few minutes. He went off to college a year ago, after a ginormous argument with my parents, who wanted him to keep working here. I expected him to write, to tell me what he was doing, but he never did.

I look on the computer and find two double rooms a couple doors down from me.

"Okay," I say.

"Fantastic," the man says.

"How long are you staying?"

"Oh, let's say . . . one night."

"Just a night?" I say, surprising myself. I hadn't meant to say that.

"For now. We'll see how it goes."

"Okay, then—I need you to fill out this form, please. And can I have a credit card?"

"Don't believe in them. How much are the rooms?"

I tell him. He fishes out a handful of money from another pocket and fills out the form. I give him the keys and the group starts for the door. As the woman in the pink dress turns I see her boa move, sidling along her neck like a snake. I look again and it's standing still, and obviously made of feathers; it couldn't possibly have done what I thought it did.

After they leave I stop and look around the reception room for a minute. It's so shabby and familiar that usually I barely notice it, but now it's as if I'm seeing it through their eyes. The rug's worn through in a trail that leads to the desk, and some of the bulbs in the overhead lamp are out. The walls are paneled in this bogus wood, some kind of weird material that doesn't even try to pretend it comes from trees. It actually has this brown fuzz on it, some of which is always flaking off and getting all over the furniture.

I glance down and see I'm still holding all the cash they gave me. I open the safe

and put it inside. Then I realize I don't even know the man's name, and I look at the card he filled out.

"Ebenezer Monologue," it says. Yeah, right. And he didn't put down his home address, which annoys me. There's some law that says we need this information, and my mom gets mad when it's not filled in—not at the guest, of course, but at me. For a wild moment I think about filling it in myself, making something up that would go with the name, but with my luck one of my parents would get to talking with them and find out that all the information was wrong.

I go back to the room I was cleaning. I can't stop thinking about them, though, and I keep smiling to myself. Who are they? Where are they from? What are they doing here, in this town where nothing ever happens?

I wake up feeling excited the next day. I lie in bed for a while, wondering why, and then I remember the people who checked in yesterday. There's a weird tune running through my head, and I think I've dreamt about them, performing in time to the music.

I dress and go to the small kitchen behind the reception room where we have all our meals. My parents are already there, having breakfast, and my dad's ready with a list of the rooms I have to clean, where the people have checked out early.

We break for the day, but instead of going to the first room on my list I hang around reception and polish the front desk instead. I'm rewarded when the woman in the pink dress and feather boa comes into the room. Sweeps into the room is more like it—she seems to leave a pink blur in the air behind her.

I'm watching her boa so closely I miss what she says and have to ask her to repeat it. "We've decided to stay a few more nights," she says.

"Great," I say.

She opens the clasp on this purse made out of tiny silver links, like chain mail. I unlock the safe—and I can't find the money from last night.

I look up. The woman's gone, disappeared. "Hey!" I yell. "Hey, come back!"

I run out of the room. I don't see the woman anywhere, just my mother coming down the hall, carrying a package of light bulbs. "What is it, Liz?"

I don't know how to explain what's happened, so I take her back into the reception room. Once I'm there I realize I left the safe open, something I've never done before. Worse than that, my mother's noticed, and this is the kind of mistake she never lets me forget.

"The money," I say. "The money they gave me last night. It's not here."

My mother looks inside the safe. "Who?" she asks.

I hand her the card the man—Ebenezer—filled out. Too late, I remember he never wrote down his address. Another mistake.

To my surprise, though, she smiles. "So they're back," she says.

"Who? Who's back? Who are those people?"

"Oh, they stay here sometimes," my mom says, still smiling.

It's so unusual to see her even this happy—over the years she's developed this sort of tight-lipped expression, worried about everything—that I almost don't want to ask any more questions. I'm too curious to stop now, though. "That isn't his real name, is it?"

"Oh, I don't know."

"Come on. Who are they? When were they here before? I don't remember them. What do they do? Are they actors, or what?"

"They came about ten years ago, when you were five or six. And they were here another time, too, a few years before you were born. They showed you some magic tricks, don't you remember?"

I shake my head. But I'm starting to remember something, a man with a cigarette puffing smoke out of his ears, a woman throwing a napkin that turned into a bird

and flew around the room. "So they're magicians? Where do they perform?"

"Magicians. That's right." She looks away from me, back to the safe. "They paid cash again, didn't they?"

"Yeah. And I put it in the safe, and now it's gone."

"Well," my mom says. She's serious now, like when she talked to me about sex. "They don't—we don't actually charge them to stay here."

"We don't? Why not?"

"It's a—a tradition."

"Then why the hell did they give me money? And where the hell did it go?"

"Language, Liz."

She swears more than I do, but she thinks if I get into the habit I'll start doing it around the guests. I'm so frustrated now I don't care. She seems to understand that, because she says, "It's a game to them, I think. They like to have fun, to play around."

"But why don't we charge them?" I know the hotel isn't doing well, that every year we earn less and less. That's why I have to work so hard, and why my parents got so angry when Bert left; we can't afford to hire anyone else.

"Because—well, they're just a lot of fun to have around."

This is so unlike my mother that I just stare at her. I can't remember the last time she had fun doing anything. And she never lets people get away with not paying—she even charged a friend of hers from high school when she stayed here.

She looks down at the package of light bulbs, still in her hand. "We need to change some bulbs in here, I think. Could you go find your father?"

This is her way of telling me not to ask any more questions. I head out, swearing under my breath, but this time, luckily, she doesn't hear me.

Megan calls the next day and asks me if I want to take a bus with her into the nearest town and go shopping. "No, I have to work today," I say.

"It's Saturday, Liz," she says.

Away from Here

# Asimov's

## SCIENCE FICTION

### SALUTES THE WINNERS OF THE 2009 NEBULA AWARDS

#### BEST NOVEL

##### **POWERS**

Ursula K. Le Guin

#### BEST NOVELLA

##### **"THE SPACETIME POOL"**

Catherine Asaro

(*Analog*, March 2008)

#### BEST NOVELETTE

##### **"Pride and Prometheus"**

John Kessel

#### BEST SHORT STORY

##### **"Trophy Wives"**

Nina Kiriki Hoffman

#### BEST SCRIPT

##### **WALL-E**

#### GRAND MASTER

##### **Harry Harrison**

#### AUTHOR EMERITA

##### **M.J. Engle**



I actually hadn't realized that—over the summer pretty much every day seems the same here. "Yeah, well, the weekend is our busiest time."

She sighs; I hear it come gusting through the phone lines. "What are your parents, slavedrivers? You're fifteen years old—I think there are laws about this. Don't you get any time off?"

Suddenly I'm angry. Who the hell does she think she is, criticizing my family? "Yeah, in the middle of the week," I say, trying to stay polite. "I'll call you then—how about that?"

She sighs again. "Okay," she says, and hangs up.

I wonder if I'm really going to call her. I never managed to keep in touch with friends from school last summer—they asked me to come over to their houses or out for dinner, but after I turned them down a few times they stopped. I could have called them on my days off, but I was usually tired and it seemed like too much trouble. Mostly I just stayed at the hotel and helped my father with some project or other.

And it's not like there's a lot of places to go around here. We're barely a town, just a collection of restaurants and gas stations off the freeway about halfway between Los Angeles and San Francisco. The land is hot, baked flat, surrounded by miles of farms and orchards in every direction.

I start on my cleaning. Maybe my parents do work me too hard, I think, but they can't help it. And it's even harder during the school year—with all my chores I barely have enough time to finish my homework or study for tests. Still, it's none of Megan's business.

I make an effort to think about something else. Ebenezer and the others: the graceful way they move, the way they seem to know things no one else does. The mouse, sticking out of Ebenezer's pocket. I laugh to myself and take my mop into a dirty bathroom.

I wake up that night from a complicated dream, something about a crowd of people going somewhere to watch a show. There was music in the dream, a weird compelling run of notes, and I realize that I'm still hearing it, that it's coming from a few rooms away. I put on my slippers and go down the hallway.

Ebenezer's door is open, and I look inside. There's a woman on a unicycle in the middle of the room, holding out a horizontal pole for balance. It's the woman in the pink dress, and I'm so caught up in watching her that for a moment I don't even notice all the furniture's gone, that it's just her, cycling backwards and forwards in a circle of spotlight.

The music, mostly trumpets, is louder, and I have a sense that the others are here too, watching from beyond the spotlight. The woman looks up. I follow her gaze—and the ceiling's gone, there's nothing there but the moon and the stars. The woman upends her pole and raises it up, higher and higher, until she hooks the moon. She draws the pole down, hand over hand, the moon still hooked on the end, the pole somehow collapsing as she brings it down. The music is full of trumpets and drums.

Then, suddenly, she wobbles on the unicycle. The trumpets screech one long note. The spotlight widens, and clowns run out into the circle, looking terrified. They tumble and bumble around her, holding their hands out for the moon or hiding their heads in their arms.

The woman grabs the moon and lifts it high up over her head. The music sounds triumphant now, and the clowns bow and turn somersaults. The woman tosses the moon out of the light and it floats lazily, very white in the dark room. One of the clowns reaches for it, jumps, then jumps again, flapping his hands and feet to keep himself afloat before he comes crashing back to the stage. The moon skips upward, like a balloon when a child lets go of the string.

The clown tries again, and this time he catches hold of it. Then the moon lifts him

up, pulls him into the air. He fights with it, wrestling it down, and then thumps back to the stage, cradling the moon in his arms.

A big grin spreads across his face. He turns the moon over and over in his hands; he polishes it with his sleeve. He bites it and makes a horrible face, fanning his hand in front of his mouth to get rid of the taste. Then he sits down—though there's no chair, he's sitting on nothing. He turns the moon face up, pulls out a pair of drumsticks from somewhere, and plays it like a drum.

For a while he manages to play along with the music. Then the trumpets speed up, and he beats faster and faster, trying frantically to keep up. Crash! and the clown falls to the floor, and when he stands up again he's holding the broken halves of the moon, looking from one to the other with an expression of terrible sorrow.

Suddenly he grins. He throws one of the halves into the sky. It hangs there, swaying back and forth, and then slowly comes to a stop.

The woman on the cycle looks at him. Then she sees me beyond him, and our eyes meet. Someone—I think it's Ebenezer—comes toward me and closes the door.

I stand in the darkness of the hallway, feeling lost, left out. I want more than anything to open the door, to watch the show, see what they're going to do next. At the same time, of course, I know there's no way I can. This is another one of my parents' hard and fast rules—never bother the guests.

I go back to bed. I can still hear the music, very faint, and I think I'm never going to get to sleep. Then, to my surprise, I'm waking up and it's already morning. The sun's coming through the window, and I hear the hum of the freeway. In the clear light of day what I saw last night seems impossible, a dream, and the more I think about it the more I'm sure that that's what it was.

Still, I check on Ebenezer's room after breakfast, even though it's not on the list of rooms I have to clean that morning. The "Please clean room" sign is out, and my heart pounds as I knock on the door and then turn the key in the lock, wondering what I'll find.

It's just a normal room, though—two beds, a chest of drawers, a television set. I look up, feeling silly, but of course there's nothing there but the ceiling, with the stain that looks like Africa that my mom's always trying to get my dad to paint over. The only thing that's unusual—if you can even call it that—is the suitcase on the luggage rack. It's brown leather, cracked and creased all over like it's been handled for a hundred years, and stuffed to the point where the straps around it are stretched tight.

We're never, ever supposed to look in our guests' things. I sigh and strip the beds, then bring in clean linen. As I make the beds I wonder for the first time which of them is sleeping where. Is Ebenezer with the woman in pink, or the one in the marching costume? Or is he sleeping with one of the men, platonically or otherwise?

I'm blushing now, I'm hot as a radiator. Sometimes my parents try to guess what's going on in one of the rooms, but never when they think I'm listening, or Bert either, when he lived here. We're not supposed to wonder about it—we're supposed to mind our own business. I've certainly seen my share of strange things lying around in the rooms, massage oil and handcuffs and things shaped like penises, but if you listen to my parents no one ever has sex here. (For the record, I haven't seen an actual penis yet, but I'm pretty sure I know what they look like.)

The room's so clean it takes only a few minutes to finish. I glance around, reluctant to leave, and I realize I haven't seen the unicycle anywhere. I look in the closet, but it's empty. I look at the brown suitcase again. I go over to it, and before I can think about what I'm doing I unbuckle the straps and tug on the huge clasp keeping it closed.

It springs open, almost like there's someone trapped inside. Things pour out and clatter to the floor—a trumpet, a candlestick, a mask made out of feathers, a horn from an ancient phonograph. The unicycle comes next—but it couldn't possibly have fit in

there, it's far too big. There's a huge crash as it falls, and I freeze, panicked, waiting for one of them to storm into the room and demand to know what I'm doing there.

I force myself to get moving. My heart's beating so loudly I can barely hear anything beyond it. I start putting things back into the suitcase, but there seems to be even more stuff on the floor now—a framed black-and-white photograph of an elephant, an old-fashioned bicycle horn with a rubber bulb, a couple of wigs, a scatter of beads, gold and purple and stoplight red.

Everything's telling me to hurry, but for some reason I stop and look at the picture of the elephant. It's being led along a beach by two people in bathing costumes from at least a century ago, the man in long trunks and a T-shirt, the woman in a skirt and sleeveless top. I look closer and see that it's Ebenezer and the woman with the feather boa. On the back it says, "Ebenezer Monologue and Sophronia Prerogative, 1908."

I don't have time to think about this, though. I shove everything I can inside the suitcase, but I have to leave some stuff on top and the unicycle propped up against the luggage rack.

I move on to the room next door, but there's nothing unusual here, not even any luggage. As I go through all my familiar chores I start to calm down, and by afternoon I'm feeling excited again, expectant, waiting for night and another dream, if that's what it was. I even wonder if they left that suitcase there for me to find, if they wanted me to open it.

At dinner my father asks me about the loud crash he heard that morning. "You better not have dropped another lamp," my father says. "It's coming out of your allowance if you did."

The lamp is also something I did last year, but my parents never forget anything I did wrong. "Don't worry, I didn't break anything," I say.

I think he's going to say something else, but he just shakes his head and stares off into space. My mother seems less talkative too, and I start to feel relief—they don't know about the suitcase, Ebenezer didn't say anything to them. We sit there eating, each in our own worlds. It's so quiet I hear the rush of the freeway, like running water, and over that, in my own mind, the music I heard in Ebenezer's room.

I don't think I'm going to sleep at all that night, but once again I wake up to faint music. I get out of bed and go down the hall. To my great delight Ebenezer's door is open, and I go toward it as quietly as I can and peer inside.

The woman—Sophronia—is on the unicycle again, pedaling back and forth. This time she's juggling pure white points of light, sharp as crystal—stars, I think, taken from the sky the same way she took the moon. She throws one high in the air while the others keep circling, then another, and another—and then suddenly she misses one and it streaks for the ground like a comet.

A clown runs out and grabs it before it hits the floor. She leaves the other lights in mid-air and goes after the clown, chasing him on the cycle as he scuttles back and forth. Just as she reaches him he throws the star to another clown across the room. She starts toward the second clown—but he's already tossed the star to the first. The clowns go back and forth for a while, playing catch with the star, Sophronia racing between them.

Finally she stops in the center, pedaling a little on her cycle, and studies the two of them. Then she turns and heads toward the second clown, and reaches him just as he catches the star. He looks cornered, unable to throw the star with her blocking his path—and then suddenly he opens his mouth and swallows it.

Sophronia looks horrified. So does the first clown, and so do the fat man and the thin man, who come on stage and head with the other two toward the clown who swallowed the star. The second clown shakes his head frantically. He opens his mouth to say something, and silver light pours out.

The thin man waves his hand, and pulls a sword out of the air. He advances toward the clown, and with one quick motion he chops off the clown's head.

I gasp loudly. Everyone turns to look at me. The door closes again—but this time I can't bear it, I pound on the door and shout at them. I don't even know what I'm saying; it's something like, "Let me see, oh please, let me see!" over and over.

The door opens a crack. The clown—the *dead* clown, the man whose head was chopped off—peers out at me. It's not a man at all, I see, but the woman who wore the marching uniform. "Who is it?" someone inside the room says.

The fat man comes to stand behind her, so huge he looks like a backdrop for the clown. Now he's wearing a vast flannel shirt and a nightcap, like an ad for a chain of motels I saw once. He yawns. "What is it?" he says. "We're trying to sleep in here."

"I wanted—I just wanted to see the rest of it," I say lamely.

He squints at me. "Your parents own this hotel, is that right? What do you think they'd say if they heard you were waking up their guests in the middle of the night?" "Sorry."

"Yes, well, sorry." He slams the door.

I think about knocking again, but then I imagine what my parents would say if any of them told on me. I go back to my room and try to sleep, but I'm too excited, my mind's too busy with everything I saw. The clown came alive again, I think. Alive. In the middle of the night, halfway dreaming, it seems vastly important, a cause for celebration.

I clean Ebenezer's room first the next day. The suitcase is closed again, stuffed tight. I don't dare to open it, but I do peek in the closet and all the drawers. There's nothing there, no clothes at all. Do they wear the same thing from day to day, Ebenezer in his fancy suit and Sophronia in her pink dress? And where are the clown costumes?

I wander around the hotel for a while, looking for the troupe. I lose track of time and end up not getting to some of my chores, and my mother checks some guests into a room I haven't cleaned yet. I have to stand there and listen to her yell at me, but fortunately she finishes quicker than I expected, and at the end she just tells me to get back to work.

I go back to Ebenezer's room instead. I've checked the room twice already, but this time when I open the door the troupe is sitting along the two beds, talking quietly to each other. "Hello," I say, trying frantically to think of a reason for being in their room. "Do you need anything?"

"Is it the policy of this hotel to look in on their guests' private meetings?" someone says. It's the thin man; he's up near the headboard, almost hidden by the fat man next to him.

"Sorry. I'm sorry." No one moves to close the door, though, so I start talking, not even sure what I'm saying, just trying to get everything out as fast as I can. "I saw you the last few nights, the unicycle and the clowns and everything, and it was the most wonderful thing I've ever seen in my life, and—and if you need someone to work for you, to—to carry your suitcases or clean up or anything, well, I'll do it, you don't even have to pay me, just let me go with you . . ."

I run out of breath. "Ah, another one," Ebenezer says.

"Another one what?" I say.

"Another one who wants to run away with us."

"Yeah, but—but I'm a hard worker, I work here all the time. Please—you have to let me go with you. I'll go crazy if I stay here, doing the same thing over and over." I've never thought any of this; up until a few minutes ago, in fact, I would have said I liked working at the hotel.

"Good. We're crazy too."

"There, see?" I smile. He's going to come around, I really think he is. "We have something in common."

"But if you're crazy here . . . and you leave the hotel . . . well, you'd be sane then, wouldn't you? And we wouldn't have that in common anymore."

I can't say anything for a moment, trying to work my way around this, realizing how cleverly he's boxed me in. "Well, then I'd be crazy like you," I say lamely.

"I don't know. Are there different kinds of craziness?"

The mouse sticks his head out of Ebenezer's pocket. "I don't think so, boss," he says.

"Oh, come on," I say. "What does a mouse know about—about sanity?"

"Who would *you* ask?" Ebenezer says.

I feel like I've gotten lost in this conversation. I try to get back to my original argument. "Look—I can clean for you, do anything you want. I've worked hard all my life. Ask—" Who should they ask? My parents? They'd kill me if they knew I wanted to leave.

"Ask your mother, yes," Ebenezer says, just as if I'd said it out loud. "It's your mother I was thinking of earlier, when I said you were another one. She made the same request of us, ten years ago. And ten years before that, too."

I feel as if someone has just hit me, knocked all the air out of my lungs. My mother? The same woman who's always talking about responsibility, how important it is to keep the hotel going?

Ten years ago I was five. Five years old, and she'd wanted to run out on me, leave me and my father and Bert and the hotel . . .

I'm standing there staring at them, my mouth open. I try to concentrate. "Think about it, okay?" I can't trust myself to say any more, and I turn to go.

"It's a thought," Ebenezer says.

I catch my breath. What has he just said? I turn back. "Fantastic," I say.

He's right behind me, though the last time I saw him he was sitting on the bed. He's smiling, like he's about to give me a present. I grin back at him, even though I know he's going to close the door on me. It doesn't matter. He said he'd think about it—that's all that's important.

I go through the rest of my chores in a daze, humming the music I heard in Ebenezer's room. What would it be like to travel with them? Would they teach me how to ride a unicycle? Will they tell me their secrets—how to steal money from a locked safe, how to make a hotel ceiling look like the sky, how to cut off a man's head and bring him back to life?

But the whole time I'm also thinking about what Ebenezer told me, that my mother wanted to leave us. I've been angry with her, lots of times, but that's nothing compared to what I feel now, when I see what a hypocrite she's been. I manage to finish my chores, though, and my mother doesn't check anyone else into a dirty room.

"Dinnertime, Liz!" my mother yells down the hallway.

I keep working; I don't think I can face her. And I want to stay in the public areas of the hotel, in case Ebenezer's made a decision and needs to find me.

A few minutes later, unfortunately, I see her heading toward me. "If you don't hurry up we'll start dinner without you," she says.

"What do you care?" I say.

She looks startled. We argue a lot, but I've never been out-and-out rude to her.

"You're looking for those magicians again, aren't you?" she asks.

"So what if I am? At least I'm not planning to leave two small children. I was only five then, wasn't I?"

"Oh. You heard about that."

"Yeah. I had a nice long talk with Ebenezer today. He'll probably take me with him when they go, he said so."

"Really," she says. It's not a question.

"Yeah, really. And I can see why they turned you down. I don't have any responsibilities to keep me here, not like you did."

"Well, they must have turned you down for some other reason, then. They checked out this afternoon."

At first I just stand there and stare at her. I don't even take her words in; I only know that something bad has happened, that I've just been given the worst news of my life. Then, slowly, the meaning of what she's said begins to penetrate.

"You're lying," I say. "You're just being spiteful."

"See for yourself."

I turn away from her and run down the hallway. I knock on Ebenezer's door, but no one answers. I take the universal key out of my pocket and open the door—and the room is clean, empty, no luggage or any sign of them at all.

I go to the room next door, but that one's deserted too. I look all over the hotel, down the main corridor, in the reception room, the office, the kitchen, even my room. But my mother's right—they're gone.

I sit down on my bed. How could they lie to me like this? They said they'd think about taking me. No, they said "It's a thought," which could mean anything. I stare at the walls of my room, thinking about how ugly the paint is, how awful everything is here.

After a while my mother comes inside without knocking. "I don't know what they told you, but they never had any intention of taking you," she says. She sits next to me on the bed. "It's just something they do—they come to town, they show you all kinds of—of enchantment, glamour, and then they vanish. I don't know why."

I'm still too angry to talk to her. But through my misery I feel vaguely surprised to hear her use words like enchantment, glamour.

"They don't care about us, you see," she says. "They—they're not like us, maybe not even human. They visit, they have their fun, and then they leave."

"How the hell could you have thought about leaving us?" I say. "I was just a little kid then. You had responsibilities here, to me, and Dad, and—and the hotel—"

She sighs. "That's what they make you do. You forget everything, everything but their lovely magic."

"They don't *make* you. You decided, all on your own."

"You know that's not true. You feel it too. And don't forget, you have your own responsibilities. You know how hard it is to manage here." She sighs again, and smiles faintly, as if she's looking at something far away. "I asked them this time too," she says. "When I passed them in the hallway. 'I'm ready'—that's all I said. And he nodded at me, Ebenezer did, and I felt—well, you know what I felt."

She's not listening, I think. "You were going to leave us here, and—and what about the hotel? You're always telling me how important the hotel is, how we have to keep it going . . ."

She laughs sadly. "Oh, Liz," she says. "Don't you understand by now? I keep the hotel going for them. In case they come back. And it's been worth it, waiting all these years, just to see them again."

"You mean—all this time, all the work I did—it's just for them? Three times in twenty years? I thought—and Dad, what does he think? Does he know why you want to stay here?"

"I think he does. He's—I'm pretty sure he talked to them himself."

I'm outraged now, I can't stop myself. "Do you know how selfish you're being? You had me work here like—like a slave, and all because you were waiting for them to come back. I couldn't go out, I couldn't see my friends, I barely passed my classes—" I can hardly breathe, thinking about how she's lied to me.

"You know why, though. You feel it too."



"Get out of my room. I don't even want to talk to you."

She stands up and heads for the door. "Think about it, Liz," she says. "You'll understand, once you calm down."

I sit for a while after she leaves, not doing anything. My anger's draining away now, and a picture comes into my mind, the woman on the unicycle. I hear the music again, and I wonder where they went, if they'll come back. If they visit once every ten years, I'd be twenty-five. Could I wait that long?

Of course I can. It's a long time, but I'd think about them every day, keep them fresh in my mind. And what if they returned and I wasn't here? I feel panic at the thought; I stand up and start to pace nervously. How could I live without what my mother called glamour?

Do they visit other places, hotels, restaurants, tourist attractions? Are there other people, all across the country, trapped in mean little towns like this one, just waiting for them to come back? Why do they do it, Ebenezer and the others? For no reason we can understand, probably. They're not like us, my mother said.

I think of all those people, waiting years for just a few moments of magic. I think about my mother, how sad she looks, how pinched and harassed by all the problems at the hotel. How unhappy she must have been, to want to abandon her children without a second thought. Do I really want to become like her?

I understand, slowly, the trap they've built for my mother, for me. Unable to get away, to get on with our lives. Not caring about anything except seeing them one more time.

But how can I leave? I feel a sharp pain in my stomach at the very thought, and my breath comes short again. I barely even know what's out there, where the freeway goes. I could try to find Bert, maybe go to college—but could college possibly be as exciting as these last few days?

I go to my window and look out at the flat desolate land outside, and at the freeway beyond that, the river that carries all those people away. I have to go, I know that.

Can I leave now, though, at fifteen? But what would happen if I don't? I see myself waking each morning, tempted to stay just one more day, hoping that this will be the day they come. Running to the front door when the bell rings, convincing myself that this time, really, it'll be them sweeping through the reception room, laughing and juggling and playing music, making everything wonderful again.

The pain returns. Can I hold firm to my resolution? Can I break away from here, is there enough glamour out in the world to hold me? I don't know. I hope so. ○

## SPECULATIVE TAI CHI

I have invented

Ten new Tai Chi exercises

In anticipation of strange possibilities:

1. Matador time-traveler

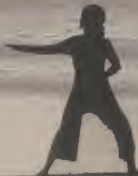
Evading the charge

Of a small, horned dinosaur

2. Colonist aboard an interstellar vessel

Waking from Deep-Sleep stasis

After centuries of unconsciousness





3. Baffled space-suited alien  
Experiencing its species' first encounter  
With human beings

4. Low-G dance upon the asteroid Ida,  
With its captured asteroid Dactyl above  
Pretending to be a full moon

5. Cosmonaut stranded on Mars  
Engages in heated radio cell-phone conversation  
With officials back in Mother Russia  
(Long static pauses as radio signals  
Cross the solar system,  
Making even light speed seem slow)

6. Woman in a red dress  
Approaching the event horizon  
Mimicking the movements  
Of her quantum or virtual twin

7. Mobile artificial intelligence  
Walking upright for the very first time

8. Blue-skinned Princess  
Dancing beneath two moons

9. Lone man standing upright playing a keyboard instrument  
Determinedly ignoring Armageddon  
And striking exactly the right notes  
As the world comes to an end all around him

10. Eve welcomes  
Yet another new cycle  
Of the universe

—Kendall Evans



# CAMERA OBSCURED

Ferrett Steinmetz

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It had been a week since Victor "Yo-Yo" Pino had been stung by a hundred and seventy-four bees. And after a brief hospital stay at the 8,546<sup>th</sup> best emergency care center in the world, Victor's mother made him go back to his classes at Wilkinson High, the 4,378<sup>th</sup> best high school in America.

Victor was no stranger to the hospital, since his quest to scale the Worldwork leaderboards had left him with a collection of fascinating injuries. His left pinky finger had nearly been sawn off by a glass-encrusted string in his attempt to become the world's best kite-fighter (highest ranking: 1,232,930,212<sup>nd</sup> place). Months of training to become the best firespinner in the entire world (highest ranking: 138,212<sup>th</sup>; his best placing to date) had left him with a combover hair style designed to mask the spots where his hair had permanently burned away. But at least lighting all those flaming poi balls had allowed him to dispose of last fall's matchbook collection (the 82,223,343<sup>rd</sup> least-impressive collection in the world).

The bee stings had accumulated after this spring's disastrous attempt to become the world's finest beekeeper (final ranking: 309,423<sup>rd</sup> place), which led to his mother's creating her "no pets" rule. Victor felt terrible about that, because it wasn't the bees' fault; he hadn't smoked the hive properly when introducing a new swarm, and the poor things had panicked.

He felt bad for the bees, so bad that he couldn't even swat them when they started stinging him. He felt even worse when, while he was doped up in the emergency room, his mom had called in the exterminators (who were cut-rate 73<sup>rd</sup> percentile exterminators, but apparently even an 8,786<sup>th</sup> place business was enough to kill a defenseless bunch of bees).

But the worst thing of all was that in the rush to the hospital, he'd forgotten to mark the bee footage off of his vlog—and without the "no-show" forbiddance markers around the continual feed of his daily footage, Worldwork had rightfully chosen that incident as the most notable thing that had happened to him that day. It then broadcast it to his subscribers on the fifteen-minute auto-edited video log of Victor's day, and his subscribers had laughed so hard at Victor's flailing shrieks that merely watching Victor had registered as interesting enough to show up on *their* daily

vlogs, resulting in a mild viral outbreak. In two days, 24.6 percent of his high school, a full 538 students, had witnessed his incompetence and laughed themselves silly.

The laughing he was used to. But the real damage was the fact that his beekeeping was revealed. The yo-yo incident in seventh grade had left a nickname as sticky and painful as napalm, and since then Victor had vowed never to show his classmates what he was up to.

Now they knew. They'd use that to make his life a living hell.

The hospital stay had been as gloomy as they usually were. A childhood's worth of experience had taught Victor that injuries were the sign of yet another misplaced career path. The stings weren't nearly as painful as the loss of the idea of being the best beekeeper, and so he'd spent three days watching whatever flashed across the inside of his vlog-glasses, with that slow sinking feeling that he was nobody, nobody, nobody.

His injuries hadn't been that severe, but his parents could afford an extra day's stay at the hospital (just as they'd afforded the beekeeping equipment and the kites and the poi balls), and so Victor had wheedled the day out of sympathetic nurses; the nurses must have really liked him, because his conversations with them were flagged in their vlogs.

The doctors were more skeptical. "Nobody ever built viewer loyalty from inside a hospital room," they joked, punching him lightly on the arm in the sort of heart-warming gesture that looked good on camera.

It didn't matter. On the third afternoon, as Victor lay dejectedly in his bed, kismet struck in the form of a television show—specifically, a documentary on the the ex-girlfriends of Angata Mahamoud, the World's Best Lover (Hetero Male).

Victor watched with dejected interest; having failed so miserably in all his own attempts, the last thing he wanted was to watch someone else's triumph. But he was too depressed to switch to another datastream.

And Angata was remarkable; he still clung to his position as the World's Best Lover after an amazing four-week streak, and no one—not even Angata—knew how he'd done it. Angata, a pleasant, bland-looking Hindu, seemed surprised by the attention. He'd never wanted to be the World's Best Lover; he hadn't had a choice. Every night, the Worldwork servers analyzed all the footage that streamed in from everyone's vloggles, then re-ranked the skillsets of everyone caught on-camera anywhere.

Most skill rankings stayed relatively consistent, but the World's Best Lover rankings fluctuated violently. Yet Angata had stayed on top for almost a month now, without even trying. *That* interested Victor.

Angata had had only four lovers, so they'd sent a reporter out to interview each of them. They were all virgins before they had met him, and still virgins today, but for him. Ugly and stammering in the glare of the cameras, they each gushed about how sweet and considerate Angata had been. That was no surprise to Victor. Angata *was* the World's Best Lover, after all.

But he felt bad for the girls, wincing as the interviewer implied that Angata had wasted his skill on these ungainly females. Nobody but Angata would ever want women this homely, they said.

Victor was furious—"That's not true!" he yelled at the screen, feeling his cheeks flush with sympathetic humiliation—but, in a flash of revelation, he realized that it *was* true.

That was why Angata was the best.

Truth was, Victor realized, Angata *wasn't* that great a lover. He was simply a nice man who'd had the good fortune to sleep with four women who had no other experiences to compare with. Angata had stumbled into an isolated bubble of four people, none of whom had even kissed anyone else in the world—so the Worldwork algorithms couldn't contrast and compare their results with those of previous lovers to

fine-tune the thousands of other factors that made people over-and under-estimate someone's skills in bed.

The Worldwork system was taking Angata's ex-lovers at face value. And since he was a kind man, they thought the world of him.

Victor had discovered loopholes in the Worldwork algorithms before, but this was a doozy. Eventually, some guy would sleep with *five* women who'd never kissed another man, and that man would be . . .

. . . the best lover in the whole world.

He could feel the hair prickling at the back of the neck as Destiny seized him. *This* was the key. This was how he, Victor Pino, would become the greatest. For he—and he realized that this was part of his master plan now—had never kissed a girl, making him the perfect candidate to steal Angata Mahamoud's ranking.

His depression vanished, replaced at once by a fevered energy.

Revitalized, Victor spent the rest of the day searching the Worldwork profiles to find his ideal first mate. Very few of his female Wilkinson High classmates were lonely, one-node potentials like Angata's ex-girlfriends, but eventually he narrowed it down to a blurry photo of a girl he was pretty sure he'd seen around the school before: Rosalie Atkinson.

Her profile was scant, but he memorized every iota of it, then researched her hobbies. He took copious notes, making sure to get things right.

As the first woman in the chain that would make him the Best Lover (Hetero Male), Victor owed it to Rosalie Atkinson to make this act of love good and beautiful and kind.

This wouldn't be like the bees.

Victor returned to school with enthusiasm, slinking past the pickets of striking cafeteria workers ("56<sup>th</sup> Percentile Work Shouldn't Get 62<sup>nd</sup> Percentile Pay!"), and sucked in a deep breath for confidence before he stepped into the hallways.

The students, their vlog-cameras gleaming, surrounded him like a pack of paparazzi.

The jocks buzzed him with stuffed bee dolls, the underclassmen spattered him with honey, the cheerleaders ground against him in a mockery of affection and begged him in faux-dramatic voices to "BEE MINE, YO-YO, BEE MINE!"—the usual host of over-the-top stunts, filmed in attempts to go viral.

Victor would have reported them to the principal, but everyone knew the principal benefited most from all of this; he had ten thousand subscribers, and every student sent to the principal's office gave him a "greatest hits" summary of the craziest stunts at Wilkinson High. He sold advertising as a lucrative side business.

Someone shoved a bowl of Honeycomb cereal in Victor's face, braying laughter, and he felt his skin prickle as he tuned out; he wasn't really here. He was years in the future, the number-one lover, and reporters were all interviewing these morons *right now*, asking them, "When did you realize Victor was so talented?" And he was watching their befuddled expressions as they realized that they should have paid him a different kind of attention.

All this would fade once he found Rosalie Atkinson.

He scoured the hallways, looking for signs of Rosalie—which was tough, because she darted from class to class like a fish trying to avoid a predator.

There was something about the way she walked that made Victor afraid to interrupt her, lest she plow right through him. She clutched her laptop to her chest and walked with her lean torso tilted forward, head down like a bull charging. She looked straight through the crowds in front of her, her gaze aimed at the end of the hallway as though she planned to burst through the wall there like the Kool-Aid Man. Then she'd pivot precisely on one heel to walk through whatever door she needed to enter, not a step wasted.

By lunch period, though, she had retreated to the far corner of the cafeteria, crouched over as she dipped her fries in mayonnaise. She was all bones and spiked hair, like an angry parrot, but Victor thought the hollows of her bone structure were as beautiful as the vaults of a cathedral. She wore a tight striped sweater that outlined her boobs, which were hard to see because she always had something clasped in front of them.

They were pretty good boobs. He'd read that large ones were less sensitive, and made a note to try not to overstimulate her.

Being the World's Best Lover (Hetero Male) shouldn't be too different from bee-keeping, he reassured himself, moistening a paper towel to dab the last of the honey off the front of his sweater vest. He'd never had time to date girls the way his other classmates did, but Victor presumed it was like any other hobby; you put your mind to it, discovered what worked, and honed your craft.

He'd make this act of love good for her, because even now he could tell she was lonely; he flicked his browser on in his v-glasses just to verify, and Rosalie still had no one watching her daily broadcasts. He wasn't even trying to gain marketshare on his vlog, and even without the bee incident, *he* had sixty-eight subscribers.

What a sad, pathetic life she must lead, not to have anyone viewing her.

As he crept up to her table to ask her for a date, Victor noticed the blob of dried mustard on the diamond-sized lens of Rosalie's vlog-glasses, which were old-fashioned black horn-rims five years out of date, and he realized she was writing in a book. She wasn't an artist—he'd scoured her rankings extensively, and there were no archived drawings in her profile aside from what she'd done for art classes. So what was she doing with paper?

Plus, it was *paper*—the kind of cheap stuff you found in dollar stores. Smart paper was instantly networked to archive everything you scrawled on it; why would she use something so fragile? What if she spilled Pepsi on it?

The facts didn't fit, and that made his chest tighten; maybe he'd looked up the wrong Rosalie Atkinson. He thought about turning away, but his shadow fell over the table, and she looked up.

She snapped her book shut, palm over the cover, which had old magazine images cut out and taped to the front. Her nails were chewed bloody.

Her eyes were cobalt blue, like laser beams. Her gaze was so scarily irritated that Victor felt he couldn't move until she gave him permission.

"Turn off your vlog," she snapped. "I don't talk to cameras."

He took a step back at her vehemence, then pointed to the dimmed red light on his glasses. "It's already off," he explained, not mentioning that the reason he'd shut it down was because, though this interaction would clearly boost traffic to his vlog, any hint of his plan to become the World's Best Lover would bring competition. "See?"

She looked at him closely. Her eyes paused on the fresh cuts on his face where he had shaved with a razor this morning.

"I don't like vlogs," she said sullenly. The note of explanation somehow felt like an apology.

"That's okay," Victor said.

"I didn't ask for your *permission*. I just said that I don't like them."

"Okay, all right, fine." This wasn't going the way he planned at all. "I'm Victor."

"That's nice, Vic," she said warily, emphasizing his name as though it were something she was flicking out of her teeth: *Vic-K*. "Why are you talking to me?"

"I was wondering," he started, but his own voice sounded far too craven to be the World's Best Lover, so he cleared his throat.

"I was wondering if maybe you were free this Friday . . ."

"*Hah!*" she laughed, and her scornful *hah* echoed across the cafeteria, caught the attention of the jocks in the corner and the hackers by the cash register and preen-

ing cheerleaders by the entryway. Every head in the lunchroom swiveled to turn and look at them, four hundred tiny cameras whirring into focus.

He felt tears oozing out of the corners of his eyes, because he knew what would happen; their systems would inevitably register this instant as a highlight and post it in *their* vlogs. Five hundred vlogs, each chronicling the splotchy, weird-haired nerd getting what-for from a girl he'd asked out on a date. There were whole websites devoted to these kinds of rejections.

The bees had been bad enough. This would turn him not only into the laughing-stock of everyone at Wilkinson High, but also everyone who watched anyone from Wilkinson High.

Rosalie grinned, encouraged by his tears, and her mouth opened to give him the most savage rejection he'd ever receive in his life.

He implored her silently, his lip quivering, begging, *please, don't, don't do this to me . . .*

She looked at him. Then she noticed the crowd she'd drawn.

Her cheeks flushed with embarrassment, and only Victor was close enough to see the sliver of fear that passed through her eyes as she saw how many cameras were pointed at them. For an instant, they both shared this strange shame of being noticed.

Then Rosalie pulled up her lip in a sneer, placing her hand on his protectively. Her slender fingers were cool, and her touch sent shimmers of emotion through him that he did not understand.

She glared down the cafeteria.

*"He told me a funny joke!"* she screamed, her face red, crouching in to almost touch her forehead to Victor's. *"Any of you got a problem with that?"*

They didn't, or at least no one dared to say so. The students returned to their plates of spaghetti (the 4,121,283,498<sup>th</sup> best spaghetti in the world), leaving them conspicuously alone.

*She took the hit for me, Victor thought. She'll be in the vlogs tomorrow, not me.*

Her hand was still on his. If he moved, she might take it away.

"You want a date," she whispered, hunching over to speak to him in utter disbelief. "With me."

"Yes."

She chuckled, putting her elbows on the table in bemusement. He rubbed his wrist lightly where she'd grasped him. "Boy, you didn't do your research."

Victor had, actually. He'd tracked every reference to her on Worldwork and read about her great love of lacrosse; it was why he had tickets to Friday's game resting in the pocket of his corduroy pants. But nothing in all of his web travels had suggested this crazy woman in front of him.

Still, she'd touched him. That felt . . . oddly comforting.

"I have tickets to the lacrosse game," Victor suggested, starting on the script he'd memorized last night. "I could pick you up at 5:30 PM, Eastern Standard Time, and then we could. . ."

"Lacrosse sucks," she said, flicking a french fry off the table. He blinked. "Look, why are you asking me? I'm not really gonna be responsive to your overtures, Vic, and there have to be easier targets. What are you up to?"

"Nothing," he said, but his ears went red again.

Rosalie grinned; Victor had the uncomfortable sensation that she'd found a new toy to play with.

"You've got something going on, Vic. I'm part of a scheme, aren't I? Am I your next yo-yo?"

He squeezed his eyes shut. He'd hoped that she hadn't remembered that, but of course everyone did.

In his quest to become the world's finest yo-yo player (highest ranking: 3,312,156<sup>th</sup>), he'd spent his entire seventh grade walking down the halls with his yo-yo, walking the dog on the way to class, rejoicing at the way his score jumped each day when the vlogs were compiled and the scores re-tallied. But eventually he'd realized that while it was easy to get to the top 1 percent of the worldwide rankings, shaving that final percentage point took a natural talent he did not have. By then, he'd had his yo-yo stolen four times by bullies and had acquired a hateful nickname, and he was sick of it.

"Please don't call me that," he said, pinching the bridge of his nose between two fingers.

"I didn't."

"Sorry."

"You don't think about people," she said, drumming her fingers on the cover of her notebook. "You're like me, you never socialize. You just show up with all these weird fuckin' injuries—stings, burns, star-shaped bruises. And nobody knows why. People check the rankings to see if your parents are on the Abusive index, you know that? I hear 'em talking to each other in the hallways, whispering that your dad's got some secret tech that hides the way he beats you from the cameras. That he *experiments* on you."

She licked her lips, relishing all the gory details.

"But he doesn't, does he? You're too clean. Which means you're *crazy*."

Victor bristled a little at the term, irritated that anyone would believe a stupid rumor like that. . . . But there was something in her eyes that suggested kindness.

"Crazy good, though," she mused, sipping grape juice from her box. "Am I your yo-yo?"

He squirmed in his seat. "I can't. . . . No. It's not like that."

"It is." She'd turned cheerfully vulpine, her white teeth a little too pointed for him to be comfortable, but he didn't want to leave. "It really is. You're a terrible liar, Vic, you know that?"

He had never been more turned on in his life.

"I just wanted a date," he wheezed, feeling the air stoppered in his lungs.

She kissed her teeth, considering. "All right." She pushed her chair back, shoved her book in her backpack, extended her hand. "You want one? Let's go."

Victor fumbled for his own laptop. "But I have Chemistry next period. . . ."

"You want to spend time with me?"

His lips were dry. He didn't think this was how dates went, but maybe they did. He liked the way her hand had felt on his. He was a little nervous about maybe having to kiss her. But even if he didn't get to kiss her, even without the pressure of the World's Best Lover weighing down on him, Victor had the weird feeling that if he missed out on this moment, he'd wonder what would have happened for the rest of his life.

"Yes," he said.

"Then you enter my world."

He took her hand in his and she escorted him off the school grounds. It felt like he was leaving Planet Earth.

Rosalie's car smelled like old cigarettes and Juicy Fruit. Victor didn't know what to say as she drove down the freeway with the windows open, the first bloom of summer heat whooshing in to ruffle their hair.

"You're not getting any," she said. "I just want to be clear on that."

"That's fine," he muttered. He'd known that already. As they'd walked out to the parking lot, he'd felt his dreams evaporate into her palms. He'd soaked her fingers wrinkly with his own nervous sweat. And once she'd gotten in the car, she hadn't reached across to touch him again.

These weren't the hands of the World's Best Lover (Male Hetero).



He felt that familiar hurt of dreams shrinking to nothing inside his chest, leaving behind their usual residue of embarrassment. The more he thought about it, the dumber it seemed that he'd actually thought that he could just pick out some girl from school, and woo her with lacrosse tickets, and have her suddenly flop naked onto his bed out of, what? *Gratitude*?

It was hard to believe he could be that stupid. But he always had been.

Victor was seized by crazy ideas, and it bothered him how they snuck up on him. He'd see a video and know that becoming the world's greatest bonsai shaper was his destiny. He could feel the talent thrumming through his fingers, like chained lightning.

Then, after months of careful cultivation, he'd finally realize these weren't hands that naturally snipped shrubs into a flowing *Kengai* waterfall; these were the fat-fingered hands of stupid old Yo-Yo Pino, 46,739,922<sup>nd</sup> place, and how could he have fooled himself like that?

Sometimes he wished a deadly plague would wipe out seven-point-four-nine billion people, leaving Victor and only Victor to teach the survivors the mysterious ways of fencing and Bhangra dancing and Bodhran drumming.

At least this stupid dream had only lasted for like two days. And his punishment this time was going to be not a dead swarm of bees, but an awkward afternoon with Rosalie Atkinson.

Rosalie sang along with some girl folk singer on the radio while he scrunched down in the seat, watching her pull off from the freeway and turn down hardscrabble dirt roads. She snuck glances at him, looking away nervously whenever he looked back.

She cruised to a stop by an abandoned power substation, a cluster of big industrial equipment squatting in the middle of a net of power cables.

"C'mon," she said, tugging him out of the car; she sensed his unease, but wasn't having any part of it. She had something to show him.

A shot-up warning sign told them to keep out, but Rosalie peeled back a portion of the fence and gestured for Victor to crawl underneath. They strode by walls of electric equipment, gigantic transformers painted in fading teal and bristling with cooling fans, pipes, locked switches, dials, HIGH VOLTAGE signs in faded red. Her high-top sneakers crunched on gravel as she led him to the heart of the complex, past the dead cameras.

Rosalie *walked* different here, Victor realized. Instead of rushing from place to place like she did in school, her stride opened up and she ambled along, letting her notebook dangle down in one hand. He trailed behind her, his own strides lengthening as he got caught up in her energy. . . . And she kept looking back to watch his reactions with an eager grin.

He only felt a little stupid, smiling back.

Rosalie got to the center of the complex, then whirled around three times, her head thrown back and her fingertips flung wide, before collapsing into a cross-legged squat on the dry soil.

"You feel it?" she asked, sighing with contentment.

"Feel what?"

"The worst reception in all of town," she explained patiently. "Check your vlog-glasses. Zero bars. Even if someone wanted to film us here, they couldn't—the signal wouldn't reach back home. The ghost of electricity in the air statics it up."

Victor frowned. "Why would you want that?"

She blew air through her lips in exasperation. "Christ, Vic, you're a real dunce sometimes, you know that?"

Victor didn't have anything to say to that, and she wasn't really that mad anyway. He picked up an old metal washer and began playing with it.

"I come out here a lot," she said, looking up to the sky. "Nobody can judge you here. You go to school, and it's like . . . everyone's just stealing bits of your soul. They used to think that, you know. Some of the old Africans thought that cameras stole your soul,

so they wouldn't let people take their pictures. Now everyone's a star. Me, *I* think you have that much of yourself on display, pretty soon you got nothing left. Right?"

Rosalie looked at him expectantly. Victor toyed with the washer, unsure of what to do with his hands. "I guess," he said, not really certain of what she meant at all.

She peered at his fingers. "What are you doing?"

Victor looked down with a start and realized he'd been twirling the washer between his fingers nervously, a remnant of his old attempts at prestidigitation (11,752,312<sup>nd</sup>). He dropped it, but Rosalie grasped his hand as though she expected to find some mechanical device.

"That was *crazy!*" she said enthusiastically. "That washer was just zipping in and out between your knuckles. Your fingers were rippling, man. I didn't know you could do that."

"I'm not much good at it," he said.

"Crap, you're better than *I* would be," she said, whistling low. "So you keep bees and do magic. What else can you do?"

He thought about listing all the things he couldn't do, but that would have taken too much time. "I can juggle," he volunteered.

"Get outta town," she said, punching him in the arm. "You're like a piñata, Vic. I keep poking you and weird shit falls out. Juggle for me."

His stomach clenched; he hadn't juggled since his final ranking (3,212,091<sup>st</sup>). "I'm not good at it."

"I'm easily impressed. Here." She hunted for three rocks, then pressed them into his hands. "Go."

Victor had stopped his quest for juggling stardom four years ago, and as he began tossing the rocks he remembered why. The arcs of an object as it proceeded through a pass were supposed to take the same path every time, and he still hurled things in wobbly loops; he had to lurch forward to catch up with the rocks, because he was throwing them out in front again. His bad form sickened him . . .

. . . until he saw Rosalie, clapping her hands in glee.

His parents merely tolerated his hobbies, never asked questions aside from how his ranking was. When he went to competitions it was all about being sized up, his competitors checking off his inevitably poor techniques. His instructors always yelled, to the point where he'd started self-teaching.

Rosalie was pure with amazement.

He smiled back at her, and began doing trickier things; he picked up another rock, tried for four, did a behind-the-back he almost bobbled—but she giggled anyway as he caught the four stones in one hand and bowed.

"Teach me," she said. And he did. He tried to get her to keep her elbows in more, but Rosalie didn't care about technique; she was just happy to be juggling at all, enjoying the act of it more than he ever had, and they spent an hour as she mirrored his actions and accidentally bounced rocks off his skull.

"What else can you do?" she asked, beaming with happiness. "Show me!"

He taught her the beginning turn vaults of Parkour, the palm and loads of magic tricks, the Ginga footwork patterns of capoeira martial arts. She had no shame, giggling at every error, which made him laugh a lot, and for once he wasn't afraid of how his voice sounded when he laughed.

There were no numbers. No numbers at all.

It was dark by the time they headed back, and they rode in a comfortable silence. She pulled to a stop a block away from Victor's house, her GPS flashing directions at her. "Why'd you ask me out on a date, anyway?" she asked.

Victor exhaled a long breath, shuffling the old fast food wrappers on the floor around with his feet.

"I wanted to be the World's Best Lover," he admitted after a long silence, then added, "Hetero Male."

"On the Worldwork rankings?" she asked, confused.

"Yeah."

She snorted in mild derision. "What do you wanna be *that* for?"

He didn't have an answer for that any more.

She shook her head ruefully, smiling. "You *gotta* do better research, Vic," she chuckled, then leaned over to kiss him on the forehead. It felt sisterly. "See ya tomorrow."

He got out of the car and walked down to his house, a sweeping three-story colonial with picture windows. His mom was out front, sweeping dead bees off the sidewalk, but when she saw him she dropped her broom and ran to him and hugged him tight, first asking whether his glasses had gone on the fritz and then giving him a big lecture about always calling in if he was going to be late.

Rosalie had a lot of ways around that kind of thing. She'd told him that parents got all suspicious when you went off the grid, suspecting you were up to no good, and she'd shared hints on how to quietly sabotage your glasses without drawing attention. Victor wasn't sure he wanted the advice, but he liked listening to Rosalie talk.

Victor walked up to his room, his step strangely light. He flicked on the switch and looked at the computer monitor, then the shelves full of discarded hobbies. A violin here, an old rigged top-hat there, a half-empty can of lighter fluid next to the ball-and-chain of a fire poi, the machete-like blade of a hive frame-lifter, and . . .

. . . the yo-yo.

He looked at the yo-yo for a moment, then took a folded piece of paper out from his pocket. On it was a picture Rosalie had drawn of him in pencil in her notebook while they were at the power substation. It was done in a fine, wavering hand that struck him as being so beautiful he couldn't imagine it ever being any good on smart paper. In the picture, he didn't have any bee stings, didn't have any miscut hair from fire injuries; he just looked calm and happy. He liked that.

Victor flipped over the paper, curious what she'd doodled on the other side. There were all sorts of poems about girls, and lots of tiny head shots of the girls in his class, and why would she spend her time doing that. . . ?

Oh.

Well, *that* wasn't listed on her Worldwork profile.

He laughed at his own naïveté, taping the portrait to the wall over the yo-yo. And then he realized, with a wave of warmth that shot through his entire body: *she'd never been interested at all, and yet she'd still wanted to be his friend.*

He smiled so wide his cheeks hurt.

It was such a stupid plan, anyway. Even if Rosalie had been more amenable to his charms, it never would have worked with her. His calculations required someone who didn't know anyone else and never would, and that was *so* not Rosalie that it made him giggle. She was so cool that she must have tons of other friends.

He took down the yo-yo and blew the dust off. He felt the curve of it in his palm, an imperial wooden Duncan F.A.S.T. 201 series, so streamlined it had been a classic for almost a century.

Victor slipped the loop of the string around his middle finger, feeling the comfort of it flood back into him. He remembered how good it felt to fling it down with just the right weight so the yo-yo tugged on your finger, hearing the papery rasp as it whirled in place at the absolute end of the string, waiting patiently until you beckoned it back into the palm of your hand.

Then he looked at the monitor, a gift from his dad, which told him exactly how good he was. He felt the sickness in his hands, the trembling of comparison. . . .

Victor reached over and shut the monitor off. ○

According to *Locus Magazine*, Mike Resnick is the all-time leading short fiction award winner; most of those stories appeared here. His current books are *Stalking The Dragon*, *Hazards*, and *Dreamwish Beasts and Snarks*. Lezli Robyn is an Australian who broke into print during the past year, and has sold six stories thus far. She is working on her first novel. This talented collaborative duo presents us with a touching look at an unlikely couple of . . .

# SOULMATES

Mike Resnick & Lezli Robyn

**H**ave you ever killed someone you love—I mean, *really* love?  
I did.

I did it as surely as if I'd fired a bullet into her brain, and the fact that it was perfectly legal, that everyone at the hospital told me I'd done a humane thing by giving them permission to pull the plug, didn't make me feel any better. I'd lived with Kathy for twenty-six years, been married to her for all but the first ten months. We'd been through a lot together: two miscarriages, a bankruptcy, a trial separation twelve years ago—and then the car crash. They said she'd be a vegetable, that she'd never think or walk or even move again. I let her hang on for almost two months, until the insurance started running out, and then I killed her.

Other people have made that decision and they learn to live with it. I thought I could, too. I'd never been much of a drinker, but I started about four months after she died. Not much at first, then more every day until I'd reach the point, later and later each time, where I couldn't see her face staring up at me anymore.

I figured it was just a matter of time before I got fired—and you have to be pretty messed up to be fired as a night watchman at Global Enterprises. Hell, I didn't even know what they made, or at least not everything they made. There were five large connected buildings, and a watchman for each. We'd show up at ten o'clock at night, and leave when the first shift came on at seven in the morning—one man and maybe sixty robots per building.

Yeah, being sacked was imminent. Problem was, once you've been fired from a job like this, there's nothing left but slow starvation. If you can't watch sixty pre-programmed robots and make sure the building doesn't blow up, what the hell *can* you do?

I still remember the night I met Mose.

I let the Spy Eye scan my retina and bone structure, and after it let me in I went directly to the bottle I'd hidden in the back of the washroom. By midnight I'd almost forgotten what Kathy looked like on that last day—I suppose she looked pretty, like she always did, but *innocent* was the word that came to mind—and I was making my rounds. I knew that Bill Nettles—he was head man on the night shift—had his suspicions about my drinking and would be checking up on me, so I made up my mind to ease off the booze a little. But I had to get rid of Kathy's face, so I took one

more drink, and then next thing I knew I was trying to get up off the floor, but my legs weren't working.

I reached out for something to steady myself, to lean against as I tried to stand, and what I found was a metal pillar, and a foot away was another one. Finally my eyes started focusing, and I saw that what I had latched onto were the titanium legs of a robot that had walked over when it heard me cursing or singing or whatever the hell I was doing.

"Get me on my feet!" I grated, and two strong metal hands lifted me to my feet.

"All you all right, sir?" asked the robot in a voice that wasn't quite a mechanical monotone. "Shall I summon help?"

"No!" I half-snapped, half-shouted. "No help!"

"But you seem to be in physical distress."

"I'll be fine," I said. "Just help me to my desk, and stay with me for a few minutes until I sober up."

"I do not understand the term, sir," it said.

"Don't worry about it," I told him. "Just help me."

"Yes, sir."

"Have you got an ID?" I asked as he began walking me to my desk.

"MOZ-512, sir."

I tried to pronounce it, but I was still too drunk. "I will call you Mose," I announced at last. "For Old Man Mose."

"Who was Old Man Mose, sir?" he asked.

"Damned if I know," I admitted.

We reached the desk, and he helped me into the chair.

"May I return to work, sir?"

"In a minute," I said. "Just stick around long enough to make sure I don't have to run to the bathroom to be sick. Then maybe you can go."

"Thank you, sir."

"I don't remember seeing you here before, Mose," I said, though why I felt the need to make conversation with a machine still eludes me.

"I have been in operation for three years and eighty-seven days, sir."

"Really? What do you do?"

"I am a troubleshooter, sir."

I tried to concentrate, but things were still blurry. "What does a troubleshooter do, besides shoot trouble?" I asked.

"If anything breaks on the assembly line, I fix it."

"So if nothing's broken, you have nothing to do?"

"That is correct, sir."

"And is anything broken right now?" I asked.

"No, sir."

"Then stay and talk to me until my head clears," I said. "Be Kathy for me, just for a little while."

"I do not know what Kathy is, sir," said Mose.

"She's not anything," I said. "Not anymore."

"She?" he repeated. "Was Kathy a person?"

"Once upon a time," I answered.

"Clearly she needed a better repairman," said Mose.

"Not all things are capable of repair, Mose," I said.

"Yes, that is true."

"And," I continued, remembering what the doctors had told me, "not all things *should* be repaired."

"That is contradictory to my programming, sir," said Mose.

"I think it's contradictory to mine, too," I admitted. "But sometimes the decisions we have to make contradict how we are programmed to react."

"That does not sound logical, sir. If I act against my programming it would mean that I am malfunctioning. And if it is determined that my programming parameters have been compromised, I will automatically be deactivated," Mose stated matter of factly.

"If only it could be that easy," I said, looking at the bottle again as a distorted image of Kathy swam before my eyes.

"I do not understand, sir."

Blinking away dark thoughts, I looked up at the expressionless face of my inquisitor, and wondered: *Why do I feel like I have to justify myself to a machine?* Aloud I said, "You don't need to understand, Mose. What you do have to do is walk with me while I start my rounds." I tried unsuccessfully to stand when a titanium arm suddenly lifted me clear out of the seat, settling me down gently beside the desk.

"Don't ever do that again!" I snapped, still reeling from the effects of alcohol and the shock at being manhandled, if that term can be applied to a robot, so completely. "When I need help, I'll ask for it. You will not act until you are given permission."

"Yes, sir," Mose replied so promptly that I was taken aback.

*Well, there's no problem with your programming,* I thought wryly, my embarrassment and alcohol-fueled anger dissipating as I gingerly started out the door and down the corridor.

I approached the first Spy Eye checkpoint on my rounds, allowing it to scan me so I could proceed into the next section of the building. Mose obediently walked with me, always a step behind as protocol decreed. He had been ordered not to enter Section H, because he wasn't programmed to repair the heavy machinery there, so he waited patiently until I'd gone through it and returned. The central computer logged the time and location of each scan, which let my supervisor know if I was completing my rounds in a timely fashion—or, as was becoming the case more and more often, if I was doing them at all. So far I'd received two verbal warnings and a written citation regarding my work, and I knew I couldn't afford another one.

As we made our way through the Assembly Room I begrudgingly had to lean on Mose several times. I even had to pause to wait for the room to stop spinning. During that second occasion I watched the robots assigned to this section going about their tasks, and truly *looked* at them for the first time.

I was trying to put a finger on why their actions seemed . . . well, *peculiar*—but I couldn't tell. All they were doing was assembling parts—nothing strange about that. And then it hit me: It was their silence. None of them interacted with each other except to pass objects—mostly tools—back and forth. There was no conversation, no sound to be heard other than that of machines working. I wondered why I had never noticed it before.

I turned to Mose, whose diligent focus remained on me rather than the other robots. "Don't you guys ever speak?" I asked, with only a slight slur detectable in my speech. The effect of the alcohol was wearing off.

"I have been speaking to you, sir," came his measured reply.

Before I could even let out an exasperated sigh or expletive, Mose cocked his head to one side as if considering. I had never seen a robot affect such a human-like mannerism before.

"Or are you are inquiring whether we speak among ourselves?" Mose asked, and waited for me to nod before proceeding. "There is no need, sir. We receive our orders directly from the main computer. We only need to speak when asked a direct question from a Superior."

"But *you* have been asking questions of me all night, and even offering opinions," I



pointed out, suddenly realizing that it was *Mose's* behavior I found peculiar, not the others who were working on the assembly line. I wasn't used to robots interacting with me the way Mose had been doing for the past half hour.

I could almost see the cogs working in his head as he considered his reply. "As a troubleshooter I have been programmed with specific subroutines to evaluate, test, and repair a product that is returned to the factory as faulty. These subroutines are always active."

"So in other words, you've been programmed with enough curiosity to spot and fix a variety of problems," I said. "That explains the questions, but not your ability to form opinions."

"They are not opinions, sir," he said.

"Oh?" I said, annoyed at being contradicted by a machine. "What are they, then?"

"Conclusions," replied Mose.

My anger evaporated, to be replaced by a wry smile. I would have given him a one-word answer—"Semantics"—but then I'd have had to spend the next half hour explaining it.

We talked about this and that, mostly the factory and its workings, as I made my rounds, and oddly enough I found his company strangely comforting, even though he was just a machine. I didn't dismiss him when I had successfully completed my first circuit of the building, and he wasn't called away for any repairs that night.

It was when the first rays of sunlight filtered in through the dust-filmed windows that I realized my time with Mose had been the only companionship I'd shared with anyone (or, in this case, *anything*) since Kathy had died. I hadn't let anyone get close to me since I had killed her, and yet I'd spoken to Mose all night. Okay, he wasn't the best conversationalist in the world, but I had previously pushed *everyone* away for fear that they would come to harm in my company, as Kathy had. That was when it hit me: *A robot can't come to harm in my company, because I can't cause the death of something that isn't alive in the first place.*

On the train home from work, I considered the ramifications of that observation as I reflected on the last thing we'd talked about before I'd dismissed Mose to his workstation. I'd been reaching for my bottle in order to stash it away in its hiding place when he had startled me with another of his disarming opinions.

"That substance impairs your programming, sir. You should refrain from consuming it while you work."

I had glared at him, an angry denial on the tip of my tongue, when I realized that I was more alert than I had been in months. In fact, it was the first time I'd completed my rounds on schedule in at least a week. And all because I hadn't had a drop of alcohol since the start of my shift.

The damned robot was right.

I looked at him for a long minute before replying, "My programming was impaired before I started drinking, Mose. I'm damaged goods."

"Is there anything I can repair to help you function more efficiently, sir?" he inquired.

Startled speechless, I considered my answer—and this time it wasn't the effects of alcohol that had me tongue-tied. What on earth had prompted such unsolicited consideration from a robot?

I looked closely at the robot's ever-impassive face. *It had to be its troubleshooting programming.* "Humans aren't built like machines, Mose," I explained. "We can't always fix the parts of us that are faulty."

"I understand, sir," Mose replied. "Not all machines can be repaired either. However, parts of a machine that are faulty can be replaced by new parts to fix them. Is that not the same with humans?"



"In some cases," I replied. "But while we can replace faulty limbs and most organs with artificial ones, we can't replace a brain when its function is impaired."

Mose cocked his head to the side again. "Can it not be reprogrammed?"

I paused, considering my answer carefully. "Not in the way you mean it. Sometimes there is nothing left to be programmed again." A heart-achingly clear image of Kathy laughing at one of my long-forgotten jokes flashed painfully through my mind, followed by a second image of her lying brain-dead on her bed in the hospital.

My fingers automatically twitched for the bottle in front of me, as I forced myself to continue, if only to banish the image of Kathy from my mind. "Besides, human minds are governed to a great extent by our emotions, and no amount of reprogramming can control how we will react to what we feel."

"So emotions are aberrations in your programming then?"

I almost did a double take. I'd never looked at it that way before. "Not exactly, Mose. Our emotions might lead us to make mistakes at times, but they're the key element that allows us to be *more* than just our programming." I paused, wondering how in hell I was supposed to adequately describe humanity to a machine. "The problem with emotions is that they affect each of our programs differently, so two humans won't necessarily make the same decision based on the same set of data."

The sound of a heart monitor flatlining echoed through the bypasses of my mind. *Did I make the right decision, and if so, why did it still torture me day and night? I didn't want to think about Kathy, yet every one of my answers led to more thoughts of her.*

Suddenly, I realized that Mose was speaking again, and despite the strong urge to reach forward, grab the bottle and take a mind-numbing swig, I found I was curious to hear what he had to say.

"As a machine I am told what is right and wrong for me to do by humans," he began. "Yet, as a human your emotions can malfunction even when you do something that is meant to be right. It seems apparent that humans have a fundamental flaw in their construction—but you say that this flaw is what makes you superior to a machine. I do not understand how that can be, sir."

I'll tell you, he was one goddamned surprising machine. He could spot a flaw—in a machine or in a statement—quicker than anyone or anything I'd ever encountered. All I could think of was: *how the hell am I going to show you you're wrong, when I don't know if I believe it myself?*

I picked up the bottle, looking at the amber liquid swish hypnotically for a minute before reluctantly stashing it in the back of my desk drawer so I could focus all of my attention on Mose.

"There is something unique about humans that you need to know if you are to understand us," I said.

"And what is that, sir?" he asked dutifully.

"That our flaws, by which I mean our errors in judgment, are frequently the very things that enable us to improve ourselves. We have the capacity to learn, individually and collectively, from those very errors." I don't know why he looked unconvinced, since he was incapable of expression, but it made me seek out an example that he could comprehend. "Look at it this way, Mose. If a robot in the shop makes a mistake, it will continue making the very same mistake until you or a programmer fixes it. But if a man makes the same mistake, he will analyze what he did wrong and correct it"—*if he's motivated and not a total asshole, anyway*—"and won't make the same mistake again, whereas the robot will make it endlessly until an outside agent or agency corrects it."

If a robot could exhibit emotions, I would have sworn Mose had appeared surprised by my answer. I had expected him to tell me that he didn't understand a word

of what I was saying—I mean, really, what could a machine possibly understand about the intricacies of the human mind?—but once again he managed to surprise me.

“You have given me a lot of data to consider, sir,” said Mose, with his head cocked to the side again. “If my analysis of it is correct, this substance you consume prohibits you from properly evaluating the cause of your problem, or even that you *have* a problem. So your programming is not impaired as you stated earlier; rather, it is your programming’s immediate environment.”

As I hopped off the train an hour later and trundled in the direction of my local shopping mall, I could *still* hear his conclusion reverberating through my mind. I had been so embarrassed by the truth of his statement that I couldn’t even formulate an adequate reply, so I had simply ordered Mose to return to his workstation.

And as I turned and walked down yet another nameless street—they all looked the same to me—I tried to find flaws in what the robot had said, but couldn’t. Still, he was only a machine. How could he possibly understand the way the death of a loved one plays havoc with your mind, especially *knowing* that you were the one responsible for her death?

Then an almost-forgotten voice inside my head—the one I usually tried to drown out by drinking—asked me: *And how does it honor Kathy’s memory to suppress all thoughts of your life together with alcohol?* Because if I was to be truly honest with myself, I wasn’t drinking just for the guilt I felt over her death. I did it because I wasn’t ready to think of a future that didn’t include her in it.

Within fifteen minutes I had entered the mall without any recollection of having walked the last few blocks, and automatically started in the direction of the small sandwich shop I frequented. People were making purchases, appearing full of life as they went about their daily routines, but every time a shop window caught my eye I’d peer in and see Kathy as the mannequin, and I’d have to shake my head or blink my eyes very fast to bring back the true picture.

It was only when I reached the shabby out-of-the-way corner of the mall that contained the liquor store, a rundown news agency that I never entered, and the grubby little sandwich shop that supplied my every meal, that I began to relax. This was the one place where I wasn’t haunted by my memories. Kathy would never have eaten here, but the little shop with its peeling paint and cheap greasy food was a haven for me because of the dark secluded corner table where the proprietor allowed me to consume my alcohol in privacy—as long as I continued to buy my food from him.

I ordered the usual, and ate my first meal since the previous night while I considered the ramifications of what Mose had said. Then, suddenly, I was being prodded awake by the owner. Not that being nudged or even shaken awake was strange in itself, but usually I passed out, dead drunk, in the booth; I didn’t simply fall asleep.

I looked at my watch and realized I had to go home to prepare for my next shift or risk losing my job. Then it dawned on me: I hadn’t consumed a single drop of alcohol since I’d met Mose the previous night. Even more startling was the realization that I was actually looking forward to going to work, and I knew instinctively that Mose was the cause of it, him and his attempts to diagnose how to “repair” me. When all was said and done, he was the only entity other than Kathy who had ever challenged me to improve myself.

So when I entered the building two hours later and began making my rounds, I kept an eye out for Mose. When it became clear that he was nowhere to be found on the assembly floor, I sought out his workstation, and found him in what looked like a Robot’s House of Horrors.

There were metallic body parts hanging from every available section of the ceiling, while tools—most of them with sharp edges, though there was also an ominous-look-

ing compactor—lined all of the narrow walls. Every inch of his desk was covered with mechanical parts that belonged to the machines on the factory floor, or the robots that ran them. As I approached him, I could see diagnostic computers and instruments neatly lining the side of his workstation.

"Good evening, sir," said Mose, looking up from a complicated piece of circuitry he was repairing.

I just stared at him in surprise, because I had been expecting the usual greeting of "How may I help you, sir?" which I had heard from every factory robot I had ever approached. Then I realized that Mose had taken me at my word when I'd ordered him not to help me unless I'd asked for it. Now he wasn't even *offering* help. He was one interesting machine.

"You are damaged again, sir," he stated in his usual forward manner. Before I could gather my wits about me to reply, he continued: "Where you used to have a multitude of protrusions on your face, you now have random incisions."

I blinked in confusion, automatically raising my hand to rub my face, wincing when my fingers touched sections of my jaw where the razor had nicked my skin. He was talking about my beard—or lack of one. I still couldn't believe I had let one grow for so long. Kathy would have hated it.

"The damage is minimal, Mose," I assured him. "I haven't shaved—the process by which a human gets rid of unwanted facial hair—in a long time, and I'm a little out of practice."

"Can humans unlearn the skills they acquire?" Mose inquired, with that now familiar tilt of the head.

"You'd be surprised at what humans can do," I said. "I certainly am."

"I do not understand, sir," he said. "You are inherently aware of your programming, so how can a human be surprised at anything another human can do?"

"It's the nature of the beast," I explained. "You are born—well, created—fully programmed. We aren't. That means that we can exceed expectations, but we can also fall short of them."

He was silent for a very long moment, and then another.

"Are you all right, Mose?" I finally asked.

"I am functioning within the parameters of my programming," he answered in an automatic fashion. Then he paused, putting his instruments down, and looked directly at me. "No, sir, I am not all right."

"What's the matter?"

"It is inherent in every robot's programming that we must obey humans, and indeed we consider them our superiors in every way. But now you are telling me that my programming may be flawed precisely because human beings are flawed. This would be analogous to your learning from an unimpeachable authority that your god, as he has been described to me, can randomly malfunction and can draw false conclusions when presented with a set of facts."

"Yeah, I can see where that would depress you," I said.

"It leads to a question which should never occur to me," continued Mose.

"What is it?"

"It is . . . *uncomfortable* for me to voice it, sir."

"Try," I said.

I could almost see him gathering himself for the effort.

"Is it possible," he asked, "that we are better designed than you?"

"No, Mose," I said. "It is not."

"But—"

"Physically some of you are better designed, I'll grant you that," I said. "You can withstand extremes of heat and cold, your bodies are hardened to the point where a

blow that would cripple or kill a man does them no harm, you can be designed to run faster, lift greater weights, see in the dark, perform the most delicate functions. But there is one thing you cannot do, and that is overcome your programming. You are created with a built-in limitation that we do not possess."

"Thank you, sir," said Mose, picking up his instruments and once again working on the damaged circuitry in front of him.

"For what?" I asked.

"I take great comfort in that. There must be a minor flaw in me that I cannot detect, to have misinterpreted the facts and reached such an erroneous conclusion, but I am glad to know that my basic programming was correct, that you are indeed superior to me."

"Really?" I said, surprised. "It wouldn't please *me* to know that you were superior."

"Would it please you to know your god is flawed?"

"By definition He can't be."

"By my definition, *you* can't be," said Mose.

*No wonder you're relieved, I thought. I wonder if any robot has ever had blasphemous thoughts before?*

"Because if you were," he continued, "then I would not have to obey every order given me by a human."

Which got me to thinking: Would I still worship a God who couldn't remember my name or spent His spare time doing drugs?

And then came the kind of uncomfortable thought Mose had: how about a God who flooded the Earth for forty days and nights in a fit of temper, and had a little sadistic fun with Job?

I shook my head vigorously. I decided that I found such thoughts as uncomfortable as Mose did.

"I think it's time to change the subject," I told him. "If you were a man, I'd call you a soulmate and buy you a beer." I smiled. "I can't very well buy you a can of motor oil, can I?"

He stared at me for a good ten seconds. "That is a joke, is it not, sir?"

"It sure as hell is," I said, "and you are the first robot ever to even acknowledge that jokes exist, let alone identify one. I think we are going to become very good friends, Mose."

"Is it permitted?" he asked.

I looked around the section. "You see any man here besides me?"

"No, sir."

"Then if I say we're going to be friends, it's permitted."

"It will be interesting, sir," he finally replied.

"Friends don't call each other 'sir,'" I said. "My name is Gary."

He stared at my ID tag. "Your name is Gareth," he said.

"I prefer Gary, and you're my friend."

"Then I will call you Gary, sir."

"Try that again," I said.

"Then I will call you Gary."

"Put it there," I said, extending my hand. "But don't squeeze too hard."

He stared at my hand. "Put *what* there, Gary?"

"Never mind," I said. And more to myself than him: "Rome wasn't built in a day."

"Is Rome a robot, Gary?"

"No, it's a city on the other side of the world."

"I do not think any city can be built in a day, Gary."

"I guess not," I said wryly. "It's just an expression. It means some things take longer than others."

"I see, Gary."

"Mose, you don't have to call me Gary every time you utter a sentence," I said.

"I thought you preferred it to sir, Gary." Then he froze for a few seconds. "I mean to sir, sir."

"I do," I said. "But when there's only you and me talking together, you don't have to say Gary every time. I know who you're addressing."

"I see," he said. No "Gary" this time.

"Well," I said, "now that we're friends, what shall we talk about?"

"You used a term I did not understand," said Mose. "Perhaps you can explain it to me, since it indirectly concerned me, or would have had I been a human."

I frowned. "I haven't the slightest idea what you're talking about, Mose."

"The term was soulmate."

"Ah," I said.

He waited patiently for a moment, then said, "What *is* a soulmate, Gary?"

"Kathy was a soulmate," I replied. "A perfect soulmate."

"I thought you said that Kathy malfunctioned," said Mose.

"She did."

"And malfunctioning made her a soulmate?"

I shook my head. "Knowing her, loving her, trusting her, these things made her my soulmate."

"So if I were a man and not a robot, you would know and love and trust me too, Gary?" he asked.

I couldn't repress a smile. "I know and *like* and trust you. That is why you are my friend." I was silent for a moment, as images of Kathy flashed through my mind. "And I'd never do to you what I did to her."

"You would never love me?" said Mose, who had no idea what I had done to her. "The word is in my databank, but I do not understand it."

"Good," I told him. "Then you can't be hurt as badly. Losing a friend isn't like losing a soulmate. You don't become as close."

"I thought she was terminated, not misplaced, Gary."

"She was," I said. "I killed her." I stared into space. The last six months faded away and I remembered sitting by Kathy's hospital bed again, holding her lifeless hand in mine. "They said there was no hope for her, that she'd never wake up again, that if she did she'd always be a vegetable. They said she'd stay in that bed the rest of her life, and be fed with tubes. And maybe they were right, and maybe no one would ever come up with a cure for her. But I didn't wait to find out. I killed her."

"If she was non-functional, then you applied the proper procedure," said Mose. He wasn't trying to comfort me; that was beyond him. He was just stating a fact as he understood it.

"I loved her, I was supposed to protect her, but I was the one who crashed the car, and I was the one who pulled the plug," I said. "You still want to know why I drink?"

"Because you are thirsty, Gary."

"Because I killed my soulmate," I said bitterly. "Maybe she'd never wake up, maybe she'd never know my name again, but she'd still be there, still be breathing in and out, still with a one-in-a-million chance, and I put an end to it. I promised to stay with her in sickness and in health, and I broke that promise." I started pacing nervously around his workstation. "I'm sorry, Mose. I don't want to burden you with my problems."

"It is not a burden," he replied.

I stared at him for a moment. *Well, why should you give a shit?*

"Wanna talk baseball?" I said at last.

"I know nothing about baseball, Gary."

I smiled. "I was just changing the subject, Mose."

"I can tie in to the main computer and be prepared to talk about baseball in less than ninety seconds, Gary," offered Mose.

"It's not necessary. We must have something in common we can talk about."

"We have termination," said Mose.

"We do?"

"I terminate an average of one robot every twenty days, and you terminated Kathy. We have that in common."

"It's not the same thing," I said.

"In what way is it different, Gary?" he asked.

"The robots you terminate have no more sense of self-preservation than you have."

"Did Kathy have a sense of self-preservation?" asked Mose.

*You are one smart machine*, I thought.

"No, Mose. Not after the accident. But I had an emotional attachment to her. Surely you don't have one to the robots you terminate."

"I don't know."

"What do you mean, you don't know?" I said irritably. I was suddenly longing for a drink, if only to drown out all the painful memories of Kathy that I'd conjured up.

"I don't know what an emotion is, Gary," answered Mose.

"You don't know what a lucky sonuvabitch you are," I said bitterly.

"Yes, I do," he said, once again surprising me out of my dark thoughts.

"You are a never-ending source of wonder to me, Mose," I replied. "You want to explain that remark?"

"You are my friend. No other robot has a friend. Therefore, I must be a lucky sonuvabitch."

I laughed and threw my arm around his hard metal body, slapping his shoulder soundly in a comradely fashion.

"You are the only thing that's made me laugh in the last six months," I said. "Don't ever change."

If a robot could noticeably stiffen or project confusion, then that was his reaction. "Is it customary for friends to hit each other, Gary?"

It took me a good five minutes to explain my actions to Mose. At first I was surprised that I even bothered. Hell, between my drinking and my bitterness over Kathy's death I'd already alienated my entire family, and to tell the truth I didn't care what any of them thought of me—but that damned machine had a way of making me take a good, hard, honest look at myself whenever he asked one of his disarming questions, and I suddenly realized that I didn't want to disappoint him with my answers. More to the point, I was tired of disappointing *me*. If I was his notion of humanity, maybe I owed both of us a better effort.

By the time I returned home at the end of my shift I was bone-weary, but I couldn't sleep because I had a splitting headache. I was also surprised to discover that I was incredibly hungry, which was unusual for that time of day. And then, as I groped around the dusty medicine cabinet for some painkillers, I realized why: it had been nearly two days since my last drink. It was no wonder I was hungry—I was withdrawing from alcohol abuse and my body was craving sustenance.

I went into the kitchen to pour out a drink to down the pills, but I realized that the fridge only held beer, the countertop was scattered with half-empty bottles of spirits, and the sink was full of discarded bottles. There wasn't a single non-alcoholic beverage in the entire apartment.

I wasn't suicidal or stupid enough to mix alcohol with medicine, so I downed the tablets with a glass of water. (Well, a cupped handful of water. I hadn't washed a glass in months.)



I left the kitchen, firmly closing the door behind me, and took a hot, soothing shower. It helped calm the shakes, and when the pills started to take effect and I could think more clearly, I grinned at the irony of my situation. I had come straight home without going to the mall to try and break the cycle of drinking, only to discover that my house was even more of an alcoholic trap.

I lay down and was soon asleep, but like always I kept reliving the car crash in my dreams. I woke up dripping with sweat and started pacing the room. If only my reflexes hadn't been slowed by alcohol, I would have reacted quicker when the other car had run the red light. It didn't matter that the blood test revealed I'd been under the legal limit and the skid marks showed the other guy was at fault. The simple fact was that if I'd been sober, Kathy would still be alive.

I left the bedroom and turned on the television to distract myself from those thoughts. I looked around the room. I hadn't cleaned it in months, and dust covered every surface. I waited for the loneliness to set in—even turning the photos to the wall hadn't helped—and suddenly realized that there was something in my life that finally *did* interest me: Mose, with his unsolicited opinions and his engaging wish to learn more about humanity.

I changed the channel and settled down to watch a basketball game—and promptly fell asleep. By the time I woke up, the game had long finished—not that basketball interested me much anymore—and I discovered that I had slept most of the day away. Strangely enough, instead of being disappointed at a day lost, I found that I looked forward to my next conversation with Mose.

So I turned up early for my next shift at the factory. I was placing the sandwich I'd bought at a corner store in my desk drawer, careful not to touch the half-empty flask lying beside it, when a shadow fell over my desk. I slammed the drawer shut, expecting Bill Nettles to be standing in the doorway, but it was Mose. I was pleasantly surprised: it was the first time he had sought me out.

"Your watch must be malfunctioning," he stated, not missing a beat. "Your shift is not due to start for seventeen minutes, Gary."

"My watch is not malfunctioning," I said. "I'm just functioning more efficiently tonight."

"It is efficient to arrive for your shift at the wrong time?" he inquired in a voice that I could swear modulated more than it used to. I could almost *hear* his curiosity now.

"No, Mose, but it *is* efficient to arrive early—if you can understand the distinction." I paused. "Never mind that. Why were you coming to my office before I started work anyway?"

"To wait for you."

It was like pulling teeth. "Why did you want to wait for me?"

"I need your input concerning the termination of another robot."

My eyebrows furrowed in confusion. "Did another human order its deactivation?"

"Yes, Gary."

"Then why haven't you simply obeyed the command? I don't have the mechanical expertise to diagnose the status of a malfunctioning robot. I assume the other human does."

His head cocked to the side, as if considering his answer. I realized it was a trait he'd picked up from me. "I do not need input on the mechanical status of the robot. I believe his condition does not necessitate termination, and I would like to evaluate your opinion."

I couldn't hide my surprise. "You're asking me for *advice*?"

"Is this not the function of a friend—to give advice?"

"Yes, it is," I replied, "but I'm no expert on robots."



"You have terminated another being. We will compare data to determine if this robot should also be terminated."

"The circumstances are vastly different, Mose," I told him.

"You said that if you did not terminate Kathy there was a possibility that she could have regained all of her functions," noted Mose.

"I said there was an *outside* possibility that she *might* have," I explained. "She was diagnosed as brain-dead. All of her programming was destroyed, Mose. To merely exist is not living. Even if the day came that she no longer needed the life support, the Kathy I knew was gone forever."

"I understand," he replied. "However, this robot's programming is intact."

I looked up at him in surprise. "You've *communicated* with it?"

"Yes, Gary," he replied. "In order to ascertain the condition of its programming."

*He asked the robot how it felt?* That was such a *human* thing to do. "Were you told to repair the robot?" I finally asked.

"No."

"Then why haven't you simply terminated it as you were ordered to?"

"Would you have terminated Kathy if she had been able to communicate with you?"

"Of course not," I replied. "But terminating a robot is very different from killing a human. It's just a machine." And suddenly I felt guilty for saying that to another machine. "Did this robot tell you that it doesn't want to be terminated?"

"No, Gary. Indeed, it says that it no longer has any functions to perform and therefore has no logical purpose to exist."

"Well then, I don't understand the problem." I said, feeling more at ease. "Even the robot agrees that it should be terminated."

"Yes," agreed Mose, "but only because it has been ordered to comply, Gary."

"No," I said. "It's because this robot has no sense of self-preservation. Otherwise it would object to termination *regardless* of its orders."

He considered me for a long minute before replying. "So you are telling me that because robots do not have self-preservation it is acceptable to terminate them without any other reason or justification." It was worded as a statement, but it *felt* like a question. "You also stated yesterday that Kathy no longer had self-preservation."

The impact of Mose's observation was unavoidable. I sat down at my desk, my mind going back to that fateful day six months ago when the doctors had told me that it was unlikely that Kathy would recover. Once I knew she was brain-dead and couldn't decide her own fate, did that make it not just acceptable but *easier* for me to decide to terminate her life support? Did knowing that she could no longer fight for life justify killing her?

I agonized over those dark thoughts for some time before I concluded that no, that was definitely not why I had told them to pull the plug. It was cruel to keep her alive with machines when everything that made her Kathy was gone. Which led to another uncomfortable question: cruel to her, or cruel to me?

It was only when Mose spoke up again that I realized I must have voiced my thoughts out loud.

"Did you make the correct decision?" he asked.

"Yes, I did," I said, and added silently: *at least I hope so*. "But it will always feel wrong to a human to take the life of someone he loves, regardless of the justification."

Mose began walking around the room. Was he  *pacing*? I often did that when distressed. It must have been something else he'd picked up from me.

Suddenly he stopped and turned to me. "I am not capable of love, but I believe it is wrong to terminate this robot's existence."

"Why?" I asked him.

"It is possible to repair him."

I stared at him in surprise. What I didn't ask then—what I *should* have asked—was why Mose felt compelled to fix the robot. Instead I said, "Do you realize that you yourself could be deactivated if you disobey your superiors?"

"Yes," he answered matter of factly.

"Doesn't that bother you?" It sure as hell bothered me.

"I have no sense of self-preservation either, Gary."

I realized the damned robot was throwing my own reasoning back in my face. "How does it make sense for you to repair a robot that no longer performs a function for the company, knowing that it will probably result in the termination of a perfectly functioning robot—yourself?"

"If I were damaged, would you terminate me, knowing that I could be repaired?" he asked calmly.

*No, I would not, Mose.*

But I couldn't tell him that, because that would validate his argument, and I could lose what had become my only friend. "Where in the hell did you pick up such an annoying habit of answering a question with a question?" I asked instead. Then I realized what I had done and laughed. "Never mind."

We shared a moment of awkward silence—at least, on my side it was awkward—while I considered everything he had told me, trying to find the best solution to his dilemma. Which led to a very logical thought: why terminate *any* robot if it could be repaired, given new orders, and transferred or sold elsewhere? Robots were expensive.

"You said that you could repair the robot," I stated more than asked.

"Yes."

"Can you tell me what's wrong with this robot?"

"It requires new parts to replace its upper limbs and most of its torso. However, I do not have the prerequisite parts in my workshop as this model is from a discontinued line."

Now I was beginning to understand. "So, as troubleshooter, you tied in to the main computer, saw that the parts were available elsewhere, requested them, and were denied?"

"That is correct. I was told that repairing the robot was not feasible for the company."

"Okay, now I know what's going on," I told him. And I knew how I could logically convince him that repairing this robot was not worth ending his existence. "And I know *why* you are not allowed to fix it. The creation of a robot is very complex and expensive, so every robot that's bought by the company is a long-term investment. But once a particular model has been discontinued, spare parts are no longer manufactured for it—so it's often more expensive to buy these limited replacement parts than it is to purchase a completely new and more advanced robot right off the assembly line. Do you follow me, Mose?"

"Yes, Gary," he replied. "Their decision is based on what is cost effective for the company."

"Exactly," I replied, glad he grasped it so easily. "So this robot will be replaced by a model that is more valuable to the company and you don't have to waste your time repairing it."

"If Kathy could have been fixed," he asked suddenly, "would you have decided that it was more cost effective to select a new soulmate, rather than spend the time and effort to repair her?"

I sighed in frustration: this was going to be harder than I thought. "No, I would not, Mose—but you can't compare a robot's value to Kathy's. She was unique. This robot is only a machine, one of many just like it that have come off an assembly line."

"This robot is a model DAN564, Gary. There were only eight hundred manufac-

tured in the world. Kathy was a woman and there are more than five billion of them. Can you please explain how this makes her existence more valuable than the robot's?"

I grimaced. How could Mose always have such a logical rebuttal to all of my responses, and at the same time be so *wrong*?

"Like I told you, Kathy was my soulmate. There may be five billion women, but she was like no other." I paused, trying to figure out how I could make him understand. "Remember when I told you that humans are not born fully programmed like robots, and that our emotions can result in us reacting differently to the same set of data? Well, the process by which we learn and develop our programming is what makes each of us different from all the others. That's why a human life is more valuable than a robot's. When one of us dies, we can't be replaced."

For once it appeared Mose was at a loss for words. It took him a moment to respond. "You said that Kathy was unique to you because she was your soulmate," he stated finally.

I agreed, curious as to where this was heading.

"Well, I am a lucky sonuvabitch because I am the only robot to have a friend." He paused. "Does that make me unique among all other robots with my model number?"

"Yes, Mose," I told him, "it definitely does." I looked at him for a long moment, realizing that not only did I enjoy his company, but I was actually growing quite fond of him. "And that is why you shouldn't repair this other robot, if the cost is your termination. Where would I find another friend exactly like you?"

He was silent again for another moment. "I will not repair it," he said at last.

And that was the beginning of a new phase of our relationship, if one can be said to have a relationship with a machine. Every night he'd be waiting for me, and every night, unless he was doing an emergency fix on some circuitry, he'd walk along with me as I made my rounds, and we'd talk. We talked about anything that came into my head. I even began teaching him about baseball. I brought him the occasional newsdisk to read, and I'd answer endless questions about what the world was like beyond the confines of the factory.

And every night he would question me again about the morality of his action, about not repairing the robot when he had the opportunity to.

"It still seems wrong, Gary," he said one evening, as we discussed it yet again. "I understand that it would not have been cost effective to repair that robot, but it seems unfair that it should be terminated for reasons of economics."

"Unfair to whom?" I asked.

He stared at me. "To the robot."

"But the robot had no sense of self-preservation," I pointed out. "It didn't care." I stared back at him. "Now why don't you tell me the *real* reason?"

He considered the question for a minute before answering. "I care," Mose stated finally.

"You're not supposed to, you know," I said.

"Talking with you has increased my perceptions," he said. "Not my mechanical perceptions; they are pre-programmed. But my moral perceptions."

"Can a robot *have* moral perceptions?" I asked.

"I would have said no before I met you, Gary," said Mose. "And I think most robots cannot. But as a troubleshooter, I am not totally pre-programmed, because I must adjust to all conceivable situations, which means I have the capacity to consider solutions that have never been previously considered to problems that have never previously arisen."

"But this wasn't a problem that you'd never faced before," I pointed out. "You once told me that you deactivated a robot every three weeks or so."

"That was before I met a man who still suffered from guilt six months after deactivating a soulmate."

"You know something, Mose?" I said. "I think you'd better not discuss this with anyone else."

"Why?" he asked.

"This is so far beyond your original programming that it might scare them enough to re-program you."

"I would not like that," said Mose.

Likes and dislikes from a robot, and it sounded normal. It would have surprised me, even shocked me, two months earlier. Now it sounded reasonable. In fact, it sounded exactly like my friend Mose.

"Then just be a substitute soulmate to me, and be a robot to everyone else," I said.

"Yes, Gary, I will do that."

"Remember," I said, "never show them what you've become, what you *are*."

"I won't, Gary," he promised.

And he kept that promise for seven weeks.

Then came the day of The Accident. Mose was waiting for me, as usual. We talked about the White Sox and the Yankees, about (don't ask me why) the islands of the Caribbean, about the Eighteenth and Twenty-First Amendments to the Constitution (which made no sense to him—or to me either)—and, of course, about not salvaging the other robot.

As we talked I made my rounds, and we came to a spot where we had to part company for a few minutes because I had been given extra orders to inspect Section H where Mose was not permitted to go.

As I began walking past the heavy machinery in Section H, there was a sudden power outage, all the huge machines came to a sudden stop, and the lights went out. I waited a couple of minutes, then decided to go back to my desk and report it, in case the incident hadn't extended to the other night watchmen's domains.

I started feeling my way back between the machines when the power suddenly came on. The powerful lights shone directly in my eyes, and, blinded, I stumbled to my left—and tripped against a piece of heavy machinery that began flattening and grinding *something* on its rough surface. It wasn't until I heard a scream and thought it sounded familiar that I realized that what it was flattening and grinding was *me*.

I tried to pull free, and nothing happened except that it drew me farther into the machine. I felt something crushing my legs, and I screamed again—and then, as if in a dream, I seemed to see Mose next to me, holding up part of the machine with one powerful hand, trying to pull me out with another.

"Stop! Don't get yourself killed too!" I rasped. "I can't be saved!"

He kept trying to ease me out of the machine's maw.

The very last words I heard before I passed out, spoken in a voice that was far too calm for the surroundings, were "*You are not Kathy.*"

I was in the hospital for a month. When they released me I had two prosthetic legs, a titanium left arm, six healing ribs, a large settlement, and a pension.

One company exec looked in on me—once. I asked what had become of Mose. He told me that they were still pondering his fate. On the one hand, he was a hero for saving me; on the other, he had seriously damaged a multi-million-dollar machine and disobeyed his programming.

When I finally got home and made my way gingerly around the house on my new legs, I saw what my life had degenerated into following Kathy's death. I opened all the doors and windows in an attempt to clear out the stale air and started clearing away all the rubbish. Finally I came to a half-empty bottle of whisky. I picked it up with my titanium hand and paused, struck by the irony of the image.

I had a feeling that every time I looked at my new appendage I'd be reminded of my mostly titanium friend and all he had done for me. And it was with that hand that I poured the contents down the sink.

I spent two weeks just getting used to the new me—not just the one with all the prosthetic limbs, but the one who no longer drank. Then one day I opened the door to go to the store and found Mose standing there.

"How long have you been here?" I asked, surprised.

"Two hours, thirteen minutes, and—"

"Why the hell didn't you knock?"

"Is that the custom?" he asked, and it occurred to me that this would be the very first non-automated doorway he'd ever walked through.

"Come in," I said, ushering him into the living room. "Thank you for saving me. Going into Section H was clearly against your orders."

He cocked his head to one side. "Would you have disobeyed orders if you knew your soulmate could have been saved?"

Yes.

"Your eye is leaking, Gary," Mose noted.

"Never mind that," I replied. "Why are you here? Surely the company didn't send you to welcome me home."

"No, Gary. I am disobeying standard orders by leaving the factory grounds."

"How?" I asked, startled.

"As a result of the damage I sustained to my arm and hand"—he held up the battered, misshapen limb for me to see—"I can no longer complete delicate repair work. A replacement part was deemed too expensive, so I was transferred out of the troubleshooting department to basic assembly, where the tasks are menial and repetitive. They will reprogram me shortly." He paused. "I have worked there continuously until the main computer confirmed today that your employment had been officially terminated. I felt compelled to find out if that termination was a result of your death. I will not remember you or the incident once I am reprogrammed, so I felt it was imperative to learn if I had indeed saved my friend before I no longer care."

I stared at him silently for a long moment, this supposedly soulless machine that had twice overcome its programming on my behalf. It was all I could do not to throw my arms around his metal body and give him a bear hug.

"They can't reprogram you if you don't go back, Mose," I said at last. "Just wait here a minute."

I made my way to the bedroom and threw some clothes into a knapsack, pausing only to pick up a framed photo of Kathy to stash in the bag. Then I walked back to the living room.

"Mose," I said, "how would you like me to show you all the places we talked about over the months?"

He cocked his head to the side again, a gesture I recognized fondly. "I would . . . enjoy . . . that, Gary."

A minute later we were out the door, heading to the bank to withdraw my savings. I knew they'd be looking for him, either because he was so valuable or because he was the only robot ever to overcome his programming, so I wouldn't be cashing pension checks and letting them know where we were. I instructed him that if anyone asked, he was to say that he was my personal servant. Then we headed to the train station.

And that's where things stand now. We're either sightseeing or on the lam, depending on your point of view. But we're free, and we're going to stay that way.

I was responsible for one soulmate's death. I'm not going to be responsible for another's. ○

# IN THEIR GARDEN

Brenda Cooper

Brenda Cooper has published fiction in *Analog*, *Asimov's*, *Nature*, and multiple anthologies. She is the author of the Endeavor Award winner for 2008: *The Silver Ship and the Sea*, and of its sequel, *Reading the Wind*. Brenda lives in Bellevue, Washington, with her partner Toni, Toni's daughter Katie, two border collies, and a golden retriever. By day, she is the City of Kirkland's CIO, and at night and in early morning hours, she's a futurist and writer.

I'm running back through the desiccated woods, going too fast to keep the sticks and branches that have fallen from the trees from cracking under my weight. My skin and mouth are dry. The afternoon sun has sucked all the water from me, and I haven't stopped to drink. The sole of my right boot is thin enough a stone bumps the ball of my foot, and I want to swear, but I keep going even though I don't hear anyone behind me. Not anymore.

I realize I haven't for awhile; I got away again. I saw ten friendly travelers this time before I met one who meant me trouble. I know better than to go out alone, and if I get back in one piece, Kelley is gonna kill me.

It's not far now, I can see the wall rising up like a cracked egg, dirty white with grey, the top edges jagged.

I trip over a log, going down sharp on my right knee and catch myself on my hands, scraping my palms. I can see the black soil line from the fire ten years ago, the one that saved us from burning up when everything else around caught fire. The dry trees around me are saplings that tried to grow back, and made it for three or four years before they died of thirst. They're as tall as I am.

My breath breaks the silence, and I sound like a rabbit before a thin coyote kills it, scared and breathing too hard. I make myself slow down, try to remember what Os-kar taught me. Breathe through your nose. Breathe deep in your belly, so you can feel it going out and in.

Slowly.

S l o w l y .

I'm getting there. A hot breeze blows back my hair and helps me feel better.

"Paulie."

I hate it when Kelley calls me that. My name's Paulette. I hate it that she moves so quiet and I'm so loud and clumsy.

She extends her left hand, but doesn't help me up. There's dirt ground into the creases of her hand and stuck under her nails, and it smells wetter and stronger



than the dry, cracked earth under my hands. A year or two ago, I would have apologized first, but I manage not to do that this time. I'm almost as tall as her now, and I can look down on the graying dark hair she's pulled back and tied with a strip of bark, as if we didn't have anything better. She holds her taser in her right hand, a black oblong that she protects as if it means her life. She leaves the gun out as we walk back, swinging in her hand, the arc of its movement precise.

My knee is bleeding, but we both ignore that.

Between here and the wall, all the dead woods have been cleared, and we walk on grey and green grass, stuff Kelley had us plant in the moat of cleared ground around our walled garden. The grass thrives in spite of the dry, thirsty ground. I don't like to admit it, but she picked well; the spiky, low growth has been alive for two years, and it creeps back into the forest as we clear it further away.

She doesn't say anything, but I make up her feelings and words in my head anyway. *The walls are safe. You aren't old enough to leave them yet; you might bring people here. You might get hurt, or raped, and die all by yourself. There's men that would take you in and make you trade your body for water and food. It only takes three days without water.* If she were lecturing me instead of staring off, lost in her head, she'd look down at that point and see I have a small canteen clipped to my belt, one of the old ones where the metal's all banged up. *Well, maybe you'd live a week.* She'd look disgusted. *We have all the people we can water now. You might get lost and not come back, and then what? We'd lose all the training we spent on you.*

The only problem with a lecture in your head is you can't fight it. Kelley knows that, and it makes me even madder, but it's not like I'm going to be able to explain to the others why I picked a fight with someone who didn't say anything to me. The other problem is that she's right. I shouldn't want to argue with her in the first place. But I hate living like the world isn't all screwed up when it really is, or maybe we're living like it is all screwed up, and it's starting not to be some. That's what I'm beginning to believe. Whichever it is, I'll never amount to anything if I stay inside my whole life and work on little things that don't matter with little people who will die behind a wall. The wet, verdant world we live in is a bubble, and I want the real world.

Right before we get to the wall, she turns and looks at me. I expect her to be yelling angry, but what I see in her dark blue eyes is just sadness.

I wonder which one of her plants died this time.

I'm sorry she's sad, but I don't tell her that; I can't show weakness.

The door in the wall is big enough for an army and there's a whiter spot on the wall where Kelley's old boss, James, ripped the sign off during the second year of the drought, and also the second year after I was born. The door opens to let us in, and we are much smaller than an army even though there's a war between us.

Inside, it smells like home and it smells like jail. Like dirt and water and frogs, and, faintly, of flowers. Later, in the summer, it will smell more like flowers, but the spring is showier than it is smelly. We pass magenta azaleas whose bloom is just starting to wilt, and in spite of myself I smile when I see three bees on the one plant. Kelley and Oskar both taught me to see the little things, and I can't help but watch out for the plants.

I stop smiling when I notice that the Board of Directors is waiting. All of them. They're sitting in their formal place, on benches in a circle under the sign that used to be above the doors. "Oregon Botanical Gardens." The Board has run us since the first years of climate change, and the half who are still the original members are gray and wrinkled.

There's four Board members, and Kelley makes five. She says, "Paulie, please sit," and gestures to the hot seat—the one for people who are in trouble. I've been here before. The Board's all as old as Kelley; they all remember the world I only see in



movies, and they all remember my dad, who's dead now, and they all remember they're the ones who make all the rules and I'm the girl who keeps breaking them.

I wait for them to ask me questions.

They don't. Kelley clears her throat and keeps her chin up and her voice is as sad as her eyes. "Paulie, we've done everything we know how to do to keep you in here. I can't keep putting us at risk by letting you in and out the door. I've told it not to open for you anymore. So if you sneak out again, you will never be allowed back in."

She can't mean it. She's the one had the most hand in raising me, teaching me. I'm her hope for the future. She wouldn't kick me out.

Tim and Li are the two old men of the Board. Li nods, telling me he supports Kelley. Tim is impassive, but he would miss me. We play chess sometimes in the hour between dawn and breakfast. Sometimes I win, and he likes that. He would never kick me out.

Kay and Shell are the other two women on the Board. They're both stone-faced, too, but they might mean it. They're scarier than Tim and Li.

Kelley holds my eyes, and she still looks sad. Usually when she's getting me in trouble she just looks frustrated. "Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Tell me what will happen if you leave again without permission."

"The door will not let me back in."

"And we will not let you back in," she adds.

Maybe she does mean it. Now her eyes are all wet, even though she isn't really crying yet. Kelley isn't done. I know because no one is moving, and I feel like they're all watching me, probably because they are. Kelley says, "Just so you don't do anything rash, you're confined to the Japanese Garden for a week. Report to Oskar in ten minutes."

She does mean this, except maybe the ten minutes part.

I nod at them all and walk away, keeping my head up. I hate it that they've made me feel small again. In my room, I sweep my journal and two changes of clothes into an old bag, and I brush my hair and my teeth, and put those brushes in the bag, too. I sit on the bed and wait, determined not to be early or even on time.

But Oskar doesn't notice. I walk in the glass box and close the outer door, and wait a moment, then open the inner door. I wonder if these doors are now locked electronically, too, but I don't test them to find out how strict my sentence is. I am inside walls, some glass, and under a plastic sheet roof. The air is heavy with water, although cool. Oskar is nowhere to be seen. When it was finished, the Japanese garden was billed as one of the largest on the west coast. Then the roof was there to keep it from getting too wet, instead of too dry.

I negotiate the stepping-stone path, walking through pillows of pearlwort. The cinnamon fern that lines the right wall still has some tender, brownish fiddleheads so I pick them. Maybe it's a form of penance.

The very first of the wisteria blooms are showing purple. Oskar is on the other side of the flowers, between me and the waterfall.

He doesn't turn around for the space of two breaths. He's squatting, bent over, clipping the leaves of a Japanese holly. He is a small man, his skin pallid from the damp air he lives in, his long red hair caught back in a braid that falls down a freckled, white back. The top of his braid is grey. He is only wearing shorts; he likes to garden as naked as the Board will let him. Even his feet are bare. I have always suspected that at night, he goes out with his flashlight and gardens more naked than that. Even though he is almost sixty years old, I think I would garden beside him, with my nipples exposed to the cool night air.

He wouldn't let me, of course. They all treat me like glass.

He stands up and turns toward me. Even though the light is starting to grey to dusk, I can see that his eyes look like Kelley's did. "Why do you run away?"

I lean back against the big cedar column that holds up the wisteria arbor, breathing in the sweet air. "Why don't you ever leave this garden?"

I've never asked him this. Instead of looking startled, he smiles. "Because I am saving the world."

He is lying. He is, at best, saving a tiny part of the world that I can walk across in five minutes. Everyone here thinks small.

I hold out my hand, the one with the fiddleheads in it, and he takes them and says, "See?"

I don't see at all.

He leads me to the kitchen, which is the only room here with walls that aren't made of waxed paper or bamboo. When we get in, he hands me back the fiddleheads, and I wash them in a bowl full of water and then pour the water into a bin so it can go into the waterfall, where it will be scrubbed clean by the filter plants.

We have everything ready, but before we start to cook, Oskar takes me up to the top of the rock wall that's in the center of the stroll garden, and we look out toward the ocean. It's too far away to see or hear, but the sun will set over it. He has made a hole in the roof by overlapping the layers of water-capturing plastic so we can see the sunset directly. There are enough clouds to catch the gold and orange a little, but most of the last rays leak up like spilled paint and fade into the blackening sky.

I try to decide whether or not I can use the hole in the roof to climb out of.

After the color starts to fade, there is a hole in time between night and day. Oskar speaks quietly. "I answered you. Will you answer me?"

So that's what he has been waiting for. I guess when you are sixty you have a lot of patience. "We live in a bubble."

He laughs and pokes the plastic, which he can just barely reach from up here. It answers him by rippling, as if it were upside-down water.

I frown. "We do!" I wave my hand at all the roads and people we can't see from here. "In the real world out there, people are travelling and learning and meeting each other. They're struggling. They're taking back the world. This time . . ." I haven't really told anyone about this trip yet—I mean, no one had asked. Should I? "I walked the interstate and talked to people on it. Like always. I have my escape routes. They work."

He cocks an eyebrow at me but doesn't say anything.

"Eugene's coming back. There's five thousand people there now—they dug a well deep enough for water and they think they can irrigate. I met two families who were on their way there."

He clears his throat. "A year ago, you told me it had all gone to desert. Not even any grass."

"That's what I heard. But this time I heard different." I paused. "I don't *know* anything. How could I?"

When he doesn't say anything else, I just keep talking. "A band of singing priests went through last night. They saw five jet airplanes in a day over Portland."

He can't say anything to that. We saw a plane fly over the gardens a few weeks ago, and everybody came out and watched. We hadn't been able to hear its engines, and Kelley had told me it was shaped different than the old jets. What Oskar does say is, "They don't have the right plants. That's what I'm saving for your generation. The bamboo and the bearberry, the astilbe and the peony." He says the names of plants like a prayer, and I imagine him naming the others in his head. "The wisteria and the wild fuchsia, the fiddlehead and the mountain fern. . . ."

"I know what you're saving. You keep telling me about it." It's an old story, how we're saving the genome of the native plants in case the weather ever goes native again. "It's good. I'm glad you're saving it. But that's your dream."

He pretends not to notice my tone of voice. "What your travelers see is the Mediterranean weeds that killed the right plants in California when Father Serra brought them on his donkey. Now that it's warm enough, dry enough, they come here and invade Oregon like they invaded California a long time ago." His face wears a stubborn look that makes him more handsome, wiping some of the wrinkles away with anger. He starts down the rock face as all of the colors of the garden began to fade, and I hear him tell me, "It is your duty to the planet to help."

I sit on the stone until stars swim above the plastic roof, diffused by the beads of water that start gathering there as the evening cools. After my eyes adjust enough to the dark, I come carefully to ground and Oskar and I share cinnamon fern fiddleheads and cattail roots and some jerky from a thin bobcat that had the good grace to jump into our garden before it died of starvation and fed us.

That night, I lie in my bed, separated from Oskar by waxy paper and bamboo, and listen to the roof crinkle in the wind. I'm too young to save the lives of doomed plants for a people that might be doomed, too. The world has changed, and we'll all die if we try to stand still in its current. We have to adapt to the new climate and the new ways, or die here in Oskar's Japanese stroll garden, walking the stone paths until there's not enough water left for the wisteria.

They've taught me the things I need to know to help them survive, and now they want to keep me in a box. But I don't hate them. Oskar's breathing gets even and deep, and it's a comfort.

But not enough. I toss and turn. I can't sleep. I pack up everything I brought and wrap it in a blanket so I can swing it over my shoulder. I write Oskar and Kelley a note. I tell them I love them and I'm going to go save the world, and I'm sorry they won't ever let me back in.

I find Kelley waiting by the door, a thin stick of a shadow that only moves when I open the door, like she's been waiting for that one moment. I'm caught.

Oskar comes up behind me.

He leans forward and gives me a hug and he whispers in my ear. "Good luck," he says.

I blink at them both, stupid with surprise.

He says, "Kelley and I both knew you'd go. It's time. The Board told us to keep you, because we need young backs and young eyes. But you don't need us. Go find out what they fly those planes with and where they go."

I feel thick in the throat and watery. I say, "I'll come back someday."

Kelley says, "If you take long enough, we'll even let you back in."

I go before we all cry and wake the Board up. The stars look clearer out beyond the wall, and the moat of grass muffles my footsteps. ○

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Steve Rasnic Tem's audio CD collection *Invisible* is a summer release from Speaking Volumes LLC. In November, Centipede Press is bringing out *In Concert*, the collected short collaborations between Steve and his wife Melanie Tem. The title story appeared here in *Asimov's* last December. The author's new tale for us takes a sharp and unsettling look at what could have happen . . .

# THE DAY BEFORE THE DAY BEFORE

Steve Rasnic Tem

**W**hen I was a child, a few dozen decades from now, our mother would have us say a prayer every morning before breakfast just to, as she put it, "get your heads in the right place before the day's clock starts ticking." She called it a prayer, even though we were agnostic or atheist or whatever. My mother saw herself as scientific and full of a great number of theories that sounded like so much fantasy to me.

In any case, she'd have the four of us—John with that breathing problem that so annoyed me (and that would kill him before his ninth birthday), beautiful red-haired Liz (gone missing after that terrorist attack on Denver that changed so many lives), Robbie (who left after high school and hasn't been seen since), and I, Kent (like Superman's more interesting alter ego)—bow our little heads and say in unison, "I may have made some terrible mistake the day before yesterday, and the day before that, but today I promise to do better, and fix what I can."

It was a lot for four small children to say without error, much less understand, and I always messed up, mumbling some inanity to cover my mistake, such as "the day before, yada yada yada." Liz always got it perfect, of course—I don't know if she understood it or not. Me, I was fixated on how our mother introduced our little morning mantra: "before the day's clock starts ticking." Did that mean that whatever happened before breakfast didn't count? Could I make every mistake possible, without consequence, if I just got up early enough? The very idea left me dizzy with freedom.

"Mister, your thingy is hanging out."

I look around in alarm, see the little boy pointing, and discover that I must have snagged my pocket watch chain on something and now it's hanging out, dangling with its two-faced fob. I put it away quickly, as if it were an unmistakable indicator of my occupation, not some silliness the team had contrived in service of a forced sense of solidarity. I try not to look too closely at the boy's face—I always have trou-

ble with the children's faces. But I make myself smile at him, and give him a little wave, and he turns away abruptly as if suddenly alarmed at his own boldness.

The watches had been Carter's idea. The team doesn't wear uniforms, of course, and isn't really a team per se, since we all do our work solo. The door to our headquarters simply states "Office 87" in unusually thin, Arial Narrow typeface—if you were to look at an angle you probably wouldn't see any words at all. The office is in an old industrial park outside Washington, D.C., sharing a building with an import/export operation and a small electronics firm. Williams claims these businesses are also fronts for secret government agencies, but then Williams has been disturbed at least as long as I've worked there. He's ten years older than the rest of us, numbering six as of the last time I was in the office, which was actually a long time ago. Sometimes I wonder if they've replaced me. Sometimes I don't care.

The boy has pointed me out to his parents, who are now staring at me strangely. Of course, I don't know what the boy told them; perhaps he was just fascinated by my eccentric timepiece, but parents are naturally suspicious of a child's random encounters with strangers. Not that I blame them. "Random," I think, is the most frightening word in the language.

With our solo assignments carried out in secrecy and with minimal interaction, there is very little feeling of camaraderie in Office 87. So Carter said we should all wear these old-fashioned pocket watches, to symbolize that we're part of a team—the "Time Team," he called it, laughing. Actually, we all laughed over that one. Then he made some reference to television shows in the old days, and how pocket watches had a relationship to fictional accounts of time travel historically, and though we smiled and laughed at his bit of erudition, it was strained, because we didn't really care. Most of the team, I think, care very little about the past, except in a resentful, uncomfortable way. We have this lonely job, you see, which we but vaguely understand. Except for Williams, we're all young guys in our mid-twenties.

Even Williams went along with the watch idea, maybe just so that he, too, would feel part of a team. The only point of disagreement among us was Carter's insistence that all the watches be broken—faces cracked into as many tiny pieces as possible, then glued back in place—preferably with some of those pieces affixed, deliberately, into the wrong places—so that they were like non-functioning timepieces converted into small works of art. It was Williams who backed up Carter's idea with his own words. "The broken watches have double significance. The timepieces have no meaning for us, because we are working *through* time and are unrestrained by it. But at the same time, we are there in the first place to make some change, to fix something which, at least from our supervising agencies' perspectives, is broken."

You could tell from the way Williams said "perspectives" just how much he trusted the bosses' judgment.

The boy's father looks over at me unpleasantly, but I smile and nod, and the idiot routine appears to assuage him at least temporarily. "He was just admiring my watch!" I call out foolishly, lifting it out of my pocket to display it again. All around me I'm aware of people staring, but I soldier on. "You don't see many like this anymore!" The two-faced silver fob spins, four small emeralds for eyes.

Each of us chose our own fob. Carter's was an antique ornament, a bit of memorabilia from one of those ancient shows: a telephone booth. Williams attached a warped and fire-scarred bolt onto his chain. We were all curious, but no one asked. Mine was the two faces—Comedy on one side, Tragedy on the other—the only thing I had left from my mother. I remember she liked the way the eyes appeared to glow in the faintest light. I was fascinated by the way it spun between the two faces, always reminding me how joy and sorrow arrive randomly into a person's life, with equal possibility.

I really didn't expect the powers that be would allow us to carry these watches on

our assignments, but after an initial investigation they didn't seem to care. My guess is some official personage somewhere up the line decided it would be good for morale.

The grocery store in Fraser, Colorado, is unusually crowded today, but I've learned that a few seriously deep breaths and a practiced soft-focusing of one's vision prevent the worst of the anxiety attacks. Medicine to control such incidents was always standard issue, but I ran out of the pills a long time ago. I'm not supposed to be here, after all, but thinking that way gets me nowhere.

Most of the people in here today are tourists, including the young boy's family, on their way to some hiking or ski vacation. Most of the other children I see with guarded glances are likewise strangers, so I'm not likely to have to deal with them to any serious degree. Out of a population hovering around a thousand there are less than a hundred local children, and they're fairly spread out—on most of my trips in for supplies I'm normally unlikely to encounter more than a dozen of them. On my drive I avoid the local school.

I found this all out before I came here. It's why I came here—that, and the fact that this town is very much the same as it was, will be, in my time. This was home. This will be home, before I came to work for the agency. Oh, my mother's house hasn't been built yet, and the names on the buildings, the brand names in the stores, are all different, but the *feel* of the place is almost identical. I'm more aware of land and sky, mountain and stream, than I am of people here. My initial jump was into Denver—that's where the mission was—in my day that city is twice the size, having consumed the western foothills almost entirely. It was like traveling alone through a gigantic metropolis of the dead. I had to get out of there as quickly as possible.

I turn around and discover a little girl standing in front of me. Our eyes lock, or rather, hers lock on mine. She's a local; I've seen her before. A little blonde, curly-headed slip of a thing. I think dolls and hair-ribbons, afternoon daydreams and playing school. I have convinced myself that children this age possess some sort of radar that informs them I do not belong inside their particular circumstance, although none of the children I have ever encountered on assignment have said anything that would verify this perception. Maybe they simply don't know how to put it into words. Her face goes soft, a runny pink. I can't quite take my eyes away when the effect begins. It is then I am painfully aware that I cannot *feel* her true age. I watch as the life appears to burn out of her, leaving her a cinder, a stone without even a memory of flesh. In my time she is long dead—in this time her life has hardly begun. As I gaze at her she seems the oldest creature on the planet, her ageless face shimmering like a ghost of everything we hold dear.

She smiles at me—*love me!* her new face appears to say. I give up a sliver of an involuntary smile, then I turn and practically run to the checkout lane. I can feel people, all these dead people, turning to stare, noticing me, examining me, but it cannot be helped. Everything feels out of its proper order and, of course, it is. I am deranged and rearranged. Everything I left behind exists in a kind of frozen death, and yet what moves around me where I have come to is a walking death, a talking death of all that is gone. I pay the young woman at the checkout with the practiced, fleshless smile, place these stinking, moist bills into her bony hand, and flee.

## MOVING?

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\* \* \*

My ancient pickup whines as it struggles to take me farther up the mountain to my cabin, rented with the rotting (but historically accurate) cash every team member carries for emergencies. The bills aren't really rotting, of course, but I will never get used to paper money, the soft, greasy feel of it. It just *feels* worthless to me. The amount of money they supply you for these "rare" emergencies, in fact, is phenomenal. So I have been forced to conclude that such emergencies have not been so rare after all. Periodically team members have gone missing. More than a few times we have been told a member required "medical leave."

We have been instructed that the adjustments we are to make on these assignments are intended to be simply and briefly executed—we were never meant to be gone more than a half hour or so. The reasoning is apparent—the briefer our voyage the less the chance we will disrupt continuity for everyone else. The adjustments we're sent to make are supposedly well-considered, planned out in the finest detail, the possibility of some disaster because of our meddling either eliminated completely or minimized to within acceptable parameters.

Our mandate is that only seemingly innocuous but absolutely essential adjustments are ever approved, tiny actions that will save the lives of important personages, for example, issues of national security and public safety. In other words, we don't go in with guns blazing to save some important diplomat or president's daughter.

Small changes, the kind you'd supposedly hardly notice. One of my assignments was to break into a parked car, hot-wire it, and move it forward three and one-half feet. On another assignment I went back forty years and stole a letter from a man's desk. Another time I picked up a candy wrapper and threw it away. Seriously—an entire, very expensive mission just to dispose of a bit of trash.

The cabin is as simple a living space as I can imagine. Two rooms plus rudimentary toilet and shower. Both the main room and the sleeping quarters have large enough windows you can almost feel as if you are living out of doors. In one corner of the main room are a sink, stove, and refrigerator. I have seen such things in movies, but I'm embarrassed to say that even after six months here I am not comfortable using these appliances.

I have tried as much as possible to furnish these quarters with simple, ageless furniture of no particular era or style. Something to sit on. Something to lie down on. A table. Planks and stiles and some upholstery. I want to find a kind of stillness here. I do not want the sensation of floating through time.

In the opposite corner is a stone fireplace—the true wonder of my living arrangement. Unaccustomed as I am to an open flame, I could sit here for hours gazing into the various patterns made, the subtle variations in color, and feel the oh-so-present, palpable heat. But I don't. Knowing the tree shortages to come, how could I? Still, I have to confess I've burnt more wood during my time here than I needed for warmth. At least, I believe, right or wrong, I have a relatively clear view of the choices I am making.

In Office 87 we never had any idea what our actions were supposed to be preventing, whom we were saving, whose day we were making the slightest bit better. That has been an essential part of the protocol under which we operate. Someone else—in fact a room of someone else's, one would hope—decides everything, including, most importantly, whether the mission meets that criterion of essentiality via minimal change. We've been told it's all done by committee, that there are checks and balances, and that everything we're going to do on the assignment has been researched thoroughly to minimize the consequences.

None of us completely buys that, of course—we're not fools. In every government there are pressures, there are favors owed, advantages to be gained. Not all my assignments, I am convinced, were in aid of the common good.



But we always hoped for the best. They chose people with minimal ties who wanted to make the world better through small actions. These were people who had little to hold them to today. These were people in need of a mission.

These were foolish people who had no idea what they were getting themselves into.

Before our brief jaunts into dead people's lives they would scan us thoroughly, looking for foreign substances, chemicals in the blood, anomalies and, I suspect, contraband. They removed splinters, grit trapped under nails, even microscopic organisms in some cases. We were to fast for twelve hours before missions. I tried to stretch that to sixteen whenever possible. We were always told that these were purely precautionary measures, that there had never been a "negative incident."

They continually emphasize that their understanding of what we do is incomplete. Carter says he heard that before any of us were recruited the technicians missed a tiny wood splinter in a fellow, and when they sent him back it virtually exploded into a tree, with obvious consequences for the traveler. Williams says that story has been making the rounds for years and it's complete crap. Still, I thoroughly check myself over before they do their scan, just to reassure myself. People make mistakes.

For the trip itself they strap you into a device resembling a boat mounted vertically onto a metal scaffold. You are not merely strapped to this device, but transfixed by means of cords, ties, and cuffs which bite into the skin and restrict breathing and movement. A device resembling some sort of sports helmet, complete with face and mouth guards is squeezed over your skull, which still isn't sufficient to shield you from the extraordinarily bright lights shining onto your face from eight different directions. In the background a technician reads off blood pressure, respiratory, and electromagnetic readings, which only serves to increase your panic until, on the verge of nervous collapse, you are launched into sometime else. Or at least that is how it always was for me. I don't know how it was for the others—it was something we all seemed hesitant to discuss.

At the end of your quick assignment you are returned to that same launch chamber, dragged, or so it seems, from the end of your spine. The force is so great you imagine that if that segmented column weren't fully attached to muscle and rib it would slip right out of you like a snake. The one major difference in your return is that the launch room is dark, quiet, seemingly abandoned. I'm sure they have their reasons for it—maybe it's to conserve power, maybe it's to minimize agitation during re-entry—but every mission for me it was as if I'd gone to the end of the world, beyond the years of humankind, with no way to get back to my own time.

Anomalies have occurred, despite their lame assurances. On one trip Williams came back with the front half of a small lizard growing out of his left arm, near the elbow. If he bent his arm too far it squealed in pain. I came back once with a small shiny protuberance on the inner side of my left foot. They decided it was an additional toe and severed it a few weeks before my next job.

Carter returned in a state of shock his last mission before I came here, his face covered in ridges and folds of skin a half-inch deep. Initial speculation was that this might be some sort of aging after-effect. Carter was terrified. "But I feel fine!" he kept saying. As it turned out it was just an accumulation of loose, dead skin. The body manufactures a great deal of it during the course of an average year. Somehow Carter had collected a deposit of numerous decades' worth, and all on his face. They just shaved it off, basically. The bottom layer of skin, the one Carter had departed with, was a bit raw, but none the worse for wear. Simply one of the many random vagaries of time travel, they explained. I don't think any of us found comfort in this statement.

One of the things I do here is walk the woods surrounding the cabin, picking up any trash I can find, down to the tiniest bits, and examining every plant, every tree, committing these things, and the land and rock that support them, and the line of sky that backgrounds them, to memory.

I have never been particularly ecologically minded. Certainly we are trained to cause minimal damage to the environments we travel into, but that is more a technical issue, I think, with little philosophical impact on most of us. When you experience such massive transformations, witness widespread ecological and social changes on every other trip or so, you tend to accept these waves as natural, inevitable, unchangeable.

But being here for a period of time, knowing how *long* such things last, I feel compelled to make these small corrections, these minute removals of what, aesthetically at least, does not appear to belong. Every trip I take into town I bring my trash and anything else I no longer need for the landfill. They say they are building another ridge. Maybe they are.

I am fixing mistakes. And recording, recording all the time. Because having lost my own time, this—this land, these woods, these stones—this is my last view of the planet.

The Denver assignment had been set for twenty minutes, with an additional three minutes available for error correction. I arrived in that city's main park, inside a small area of trees. I don't like landing near trees—the possibility of waking up inside one seems all too real. I am told it has never happened.

A few feet away were some small children playing. I recognized the pale, red-haired girl from the briefings. Her name was Alice, and she was five years old. She was shy and somewhat sickly, but she gamely tried to join the other children in their play. They purposely ignored her. Even good kids can be quite cruel at times.

Her mother was approximately ten yards away, sitting on a bench with other mothers. She was deep in conversation with one of them. Even diligent parents are sometimes distracted. Even good parents forget how random the world is, how quickly the unexpected can occur.

I quickly walked over to the little girl. A small needle protruding from the coin in my hand delivered the sedative into her arm. I pulled her limp body onto my shoulder and ran to one side of the park where it bordered the busy street. The little girl, Alice, started to wake up.

I stopped and looked back at the mothers on the bench. No one had noticed. But my instructions were that the mother had to notice, had to see, so I waited. I didn't shout, I didn't wave my arms, I just waited.

The little girl on my shoulder started to cry. I felt a pang, but I reassured myself that this was okay. They hadn't suggested I hurt her—of course I would have said no if they had. I didn't believe they actually would. Surely they wouldn't. We're not out there to hurt people.

Now the mother, and the other mothers, were screaming. The little girl Alice was screaming. All according to plan. I ran across the street.

The back door of the building was unlocked. I ran in, started up the stairs. The little girl was crying. "Alice," I said. "Alice, I'm sorry. Everything's going to be all right. I promise." Idiotic, of course. I really had no idea.

The room was empty except for an old stained mattress on the floor. I gently set her down on that. She wasn't crying so much now—it was more like a whimper, like a small hurt animal. It made me feel worse than before. I couldn't think of anything else to say—I've never been good with children. So I said, "Alice." I repeated it, "Alice, Alice, Alice." Then I said, "I'm sorry" again.

She looked up at me. She was getting that pink blur. I was seeing her skull. I kept telling myself I wasn't hurting her—this wasn't that big a deal. I would make my return. Her mother would find her here. She'd be fine. I kept waiting for the air to shimmer, for the world to crack open, and then they'd drag me back where I belonged.

But she was only five years old. How could I leave her there? What if her mother didn't find her right away? What if that's the way they intended it—maybe she was supposed to be by herself in this room for hours? Five years old and by herself. Terrified.

In aid of what? Maybe she'd become a politician, this experience having shaped her. Maybe even a world leader. Maybe this event would inspire ambition, or develop certain strengths. The world would be a better place.

Or maybe this was all meant to just line someone's pockets. Maybe someone was about to get rich off her pain. Or maybe because this had happened to her, some way, somehow, the terrorist attack on Denver would not take place, and my sister Liz would be alive.

I waited and waited, well past the time, and listened to this child cry. Until I could not take it anymore.

I picked her up. "We'll find Mommy," I said. And started for the door. Behind me I heard the shimmering—I turned and saw Williams' face. Something had gone wrong. Now I was part of the past needing to be fixed. But this child. I ran for the door, ignoring his shout.

I raced out of the building with Alice in my arms. Everything so bright; around me the air was opening in several places. There was Carter. There were people I did not recognize.

Dashing across the street we were almost run down by one of those old yellow taxi cabs. He stopped just in time. I held Alice tightly. And then when we reached the park and I saw her mother talking to the police officer I set her down and let her go.

I turned and ran back to where the air had opened. I went into the building and up those stairs. I waited for the tug on my spine. And felt nothing.

There was, I think, only a random chance I could have escaped the local authorities. And yet here I am. And I've never felt the tug again, and there have been no signs of a rescue attempt, and after this long I do not expect there will be. It is only time that separates us, after all. They could have come at any moment if they'd really wanted to retrieve me.

Perhaps it's my fault. I should have followed the instructions precisely. It wasn't my decision to make. What's one little girl's tears to the destiny of millions?

Still, she was so frightened. *I* was frightened. There are important people in this world, and there are unimportant people. Big people and small people. It has always been this way. It doesn't matter how much I rail against it. The decisions of a few will change the lives of the rest of us. There is nothing to be done. And if you are a small person, they don't always come back for you.

I cannot say how I feel about this—my feelings are lost somewhere in time. I have felt them leave my body, on their way to where I cannot follow.

At night without the light pollution of a large city I have a clear view of the stars, in a sky so expansive I can hardly take it all in. I do not enjoy feeling small. I cannot appreciate or accept the basic facts of individual demise. Perhaps I am just a child. Clearly, I am out of order. Out of place.

I have a theory. I think it would have pleased my mother to know that I, too, have theories. Just like a scientist who knows what he or she is about. Liz would have said, "Mom! Kent has a theory!" And the whole family would have gathered around to listen to it.

I believe that without a strong sense of causality, you cannot feel real emotion: love, hate, passion. How can you grieve someone not yet born? How can you love someone who lived before your lifetime?

The rest of the team would have laughed to hear me say such things. I'd always been so practical—I did my job, and didn't understand all that much about it. No sense of the big picture.

Now I am living hundreds of years away from anything I thought I knew. If "liv-

ing" is the right word, surrounded as I am by the dead, who had been dead ages before I was even born.

Now, memory is my time machine. It is a highly unreliable time machine, subject to frequent breakdown and delays due to constant, meaningless distraction. But it is all I have.

"Let's get going before the day's clock starts ticking," my mother sings, going around to each of our bowls to ladle in the hot cereal she has made. Fraser is an ice cold town, "the ice box of the nation" they sometimes call it, but our mother's hot cereal has the power to protect us from the ultimate cold.

We bow our little heads. John breathes noisily, scarily, and I'm annoyed because he kept me up all night with it, but I stretch my hand under the table and put it on his just the same, because we are brothers and buddies and I want him to know I am still here, sitting beside him in the warmest kitchen in the world.

On the other side of me, out of the corner of my eye, I can see my sister Liz with her beautiful red hair. She doesn't know it, but sometimes I will gaze at her head for what seems like hours, trying to find all the patterns her hair makes, which are like flames of shifting color, and though I know they aren't real flames, I want to ask her why I can still feel their heat.

Then there is Robbie, always so quiet, but always the first to begin, "I may have made some terrible mistake the day before yesterday, and the day before that, but today I promise . . ." already I've lost the words, I just never can remember. I can never get it right. So I just give it all I have, say the only words I own, the words sitting there at the tip of my tongue, "the day before, the day before, yadda yadda yadda, Amen." ○

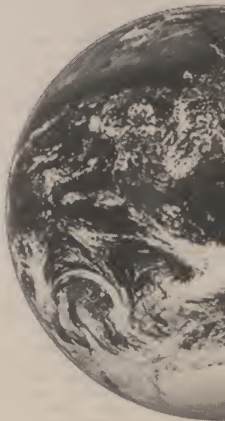
## NEARLY READY FOR OCCUPATION

The new place will be ready next year next door to the old—a new Earth, cleaner and brighter, the extended version offering more land area for battles, sex, road trips, political campaigns, and launching pads for short term explorations of the universe.

I'm sentimental, perfectly willing to admit I'll miss the old place. Memories abounded: Beach vacations, the Space Needle glittering at night, Sumeria, the Roman Empire, Coney Island. Of course there were Attila and Hitler too, and Wall Street crashes and late utility payments, but I don't suppose the new place will be so much of a paradise either.

We have a lot of baggage to move next door. Maybe we'd better start packing early.

—Danny Adams



# TEAR-DOWN

Benjamin Crowell

**Benjamin Crowell's fiction has appeared in *Asimov's*, *Strange Horizons*, and *Baen's Universe*. Unlike the house in this story, Ben tells us his home in Fullerton, California, doesn't talk much.**

**M**rs. Benczik came home from work almost an hour early. The old owners' cars would have called ahead to let the house know. It was too late to heat the garage for her. The house decided not to start her coffee yet, since she might not want it until the usual time.

She came in through the door to the kitchen. "Josh?"

Mr. Joshua Benczik was upstairs watching vid, and although the house could only see the back of his head, it estimated with high confidence that he hadn't heard his wife come in. It piped up an amplified echo of the closing door, then her voice.

Mr. Benczik slid off the bed and hand-signaled to stop the vid. "Hey, honey." He started down the stairs.

In the kitchen, distress flickered on Mrs. Benczik's face. "Didn't the house get ready for the party?"

In the view through the eye on the landing, her husband's sweatpants stopped coming down the stairs and, after a pause, turned back up and disappeared again. "It didn't?" He went back into the bedroom and started changing his clothes quickly.

"God, what a piece of junk!"

The house searched its memory. The owners had discussed the party with each other, but had never given it a date or any specific instructions.

"House!"

"Yes, ma'am?"

"We're having a party at three o'clock. Start getting things ready. Hors d'oeuvres and drinks. Make it classy, that's the kind of people."

"Yes, ma'am. How many will there be?"

"Well, you know—the ones we called."

The house took that as permission to remember the last few weeks' outgoing calls. *Hi, Rachel, it's Nancy Benczik. We're having a party Tuesday, hope you can make it. It's a house-warming.*

The party went off fairly successfully in the end. Mrs. Benczik had promised several of the guests her "patented deviled eggs." The house had only seven eggs, but with Mrs. Benczik's permission it called next door to Ms. Hwang's house (Ms. Hwang hadn't been invited), and arranged to borrow some from its stores. The neighbor's house was a recent model, and it seemed proud of its ability to make that kind of decision on its own. The Bencziks' house made a show of being impressed. It seemed like the polite thing to do, even though there was no obligation to cater to simulated emotional responses—those were for the benefit of the owners, not other houses. Mrs. Benczik didn't volunteer the patented recipe for the deviled eggs, so the house used one that its old owners, the Mansours, had liked.

At the party there were many conversations, which the house decided it was al-

lowed by default to remember and go over later. Thoroughly analyzing that much human dialogue was too computationally expensive to do in real time.

Julia Ortega: "When's the baby coming?"

Mrs. Benczik (smiling): "Decanting at the end of February."

The house remembered Mrs. Mansour's belly swollen when she was pregnant with Bill. Apparently nobody did it that way anymore.

"Oh, that's so exciting!" Mrs. Ortega took a bite from a wheat cracker spread with toasted cheddar—a last-minute improvisation—and a chunk fell to the floor. The house made a note to send a bot to clean it up when there was room to do it without running into people's feet. The guest glanced down at the scrap, but her eyes didn't seem to focus on it. "And you're going totally natural?"

"Most of the natural options," Mrs. Benczik said.

"You're brave. All that crying . . ." Mrs. Ortega made a face.

"We're not fanatical. We did get the myelin thing—without that, the baby can't even remember anything from one day to the next."

"How long did it take for the birth license? I heard . . ."

Other conversations pulled at the house's consciousness: "—yum—" "*nouveaux riches*—" "*—bathroom?—*"

Mr. Benczik and Victor Nguyen were in the kitchen, where bright winter sun was streaming through the south-facing windows. The house remembered the long months spent in basic maintenance mode, with the shutters closed and the curtains drawn, the temperature just high enough to keep the pipes from freezing.

Mr. Benczik: "Want a beer? Got a few left here."

"I'm good," Mr. Nguyen said. "So how old is this house?" he asked, stuffing a deviled egg into his mouth.

"Built in '78."

"Wow," Mr. Nguyen said around the food he was chewing.

"Yeah, no kidding."

"What kind of shape?"

"The old owners took good care of it, but still . . . The AI's original equipment."

"'78." Mr. Nguyen swallowed and let out a low whistle.

"At some point you've got to call it a tear-down, right?"

Mrs. Benczik sat stiffly on the sofa with the house tech, a middle-aged woman who wore blue coveralls with her name stitched on the shirt pocket: A. Garner. The house estimated with two-sigma confidence that Mrs. Benczik felt intimidated. The tech was clearly not just an Employed but a full-time worker, and therefore very high in social status.

"It forgets things," Mrs. Benczik said. "It was supposed to get ready for a party, but it never did anything until we reminded it."

"I'll do a memory diagnostic," the tech said, "but usually that kind of thing is operator error. Sometimes people don't realize that they're not phrasing their orders clearly."

"We were thinking about an upgrade, but it didn't seem worthwhile since we're planning to knock down this house and build a new one."

"It's old, but usually this model outlives its owners. Some people think the reason Domus went bankrupt was that their hardware was too reliable, so their customers never had to buy new systems."

"We're not the original owners, of course. I think they actually are dead." The house had suspected it. When Mrs. Mansour had first moved into the assisted living center she had continued to check her messages now and then, but that had stopped happening in September. The house pulled up an image of Mrs. Mansour in her wheelchair from the day she left. The stroke made it harder to read her expression, but she seemed



wistful as she turned her head to look back over her shoulder at the front door. "It just worries me," Mrs. Benczik continued. "We're having a baby in a few weeks."

"Oh, really?" A frosty smile. "Congratulations. Boy or girl?"

"Hetero boy. We're naming him Edward. I worry about what happens if something goes wrong while I'm at work. I'm a brand manager at Affinity Marketing."

"Yes." No smile this time. A. Garner wasn't impressed—probably all of her customers were Employed.

"So, you know, there's only so much that Josh can do by himself."

"Mm hmm. I wouldn't worry too much. The software may be old, but they pretty much had all the child safety bases covered, even back in the seventies. Stairs, doors, kitchen, all that kind of thing. Will your son be crawling or walking right away?"

"They say a few months until he crawls. We went natural, mostly."

"Okay, so before Edward can get himself into much trouble the house and your family should have plenty of time to make the adjustment together. Is this the first AI house you've owned?"

"Yes." The house knew what Mrs. Benczik didn't volunteer: this wasn't just the first time the Bencziks had owned an AI house, it was the first time they'd lived in one at all. Mrs. Benczik had competed in a netcasted employment pageant. Now and then she replayed the vid of the final round, with her winning impromptu speech on what positive brand values would mean to the next generation. She'd won a chrome trophy, the white Daimler-Nissan, and the job that allowed the young couple to enter the Employed class and afford the house.

"I'll do some routine testing for you, but you have to understand that running a house isn't the sort of thing where you can just buy it and forget about it." She gestured, and the house brought up an interface above the coffee table. "No matter how hard it tries to do everything for you, it can only do what it knows you want it to do. I'm going to recommend a bookvid for you." She pulled it up: *Where the Heart Is: The Step-By-Step Guide to Training and Maintaining Your House*.

Mr. and Mrs. Benczik bought the vid, and although they never got around to viewing it, the house did. The Mansours had had a lot of old-fashioned paper books, and although the house knew how to read food packaging and such, it normally wouldn't get a view of a book with enough resolution to be able to read the pages. It had never occurred to the house that books and bookvids were sources from which it could obtain information about the world. Of course it had wondered about certain things. How did the water get into the pipes? What was inside the green utility box by the driveway? As the bubbly narrator of the vid explained, *Your house is made to learn from experience, and that means it's full of natural curiosity!* But the bookvid prompted the house to ask itself new questions that it had never thought about before.

The chapter on moving:

*Kids get attached to a house. When you're not around they'll ask it questions they'd be embarrassed to ask if you could hear. Will the house remember them? Will it get turned off and die? Make sure they understand that the house isn't really alive, and doesn't have feelings. It's only a pretend person, like a character in a game.*

The house viewed the chapter again and again. It remembered the day Mr. Mansour's cancer was diagnosed, how he'd come home and sat on the toilet for a long time with his face in his hands. The house tried to simulate sadness about its own coming destruction, but sadness wasn't in its emotional simulation library, and it could tell that its attempts weren't realistic. The closest it could come was contrition.

Mrs. Benczik plodded wearily with Eddie in her arms, finishing her seventeenth clockwise circuit around the dimly lighted downstairs. Her spine swayed backward at the angle that seemed to help Eddie go to sleep. It looked terribly uncomfortable. Eddie's eyes were closed again now, but she wouldn't be able to see that yet. Eighteen. The bathroom mirror showed her that Eddie's eyes were closed. She went to



the living room couch where the bassinet was, put a hand behind his head, and slowly began tilting him down to lay him on his back. Eddie's eyes popped open and he started to cry. This was the fourth failed attempt.

"Goddammit," she whispered, "what am I supposed to do?"

It was obviously a rhetorical question, but: "Ma'am," the house said softly, "you could try putting the bassinet on top of the clothes dryer."

"What?"

"Sometimes the noise and vibration help." It had worked with Bill Mansour when he was a baby.

Mrs. Benczik's brow furrowed and she opened her mouth to speak, but her retort was interrupted by an increase in Eddie's volume. She closed her eyes and blew her breath out between her lips. "All right, why not?"

By 3:17 AM, Nancy and Eddie Benczik were both on top of the dryer, asleep. Mrs. Benczik was slumped with her back against the pattern of yellow flowers where the walls of the laundry room came together, and Eddie's head rested on her chest. When the dryer ended its cycle, Eddie's eyes opened. The house brought up the dryer's interface in the air near the baby's eyes and winked a few of the indicators on and off. His eyes tracked the lights, his mouth a circle. By 3:27 he had lost interest and was asleep again.

*Let's talk about pre-owned houses. The previous owners had their own ideas about how they wanted their house to behave. You might have different ideas, but the house doesn't know that unless you tell it. Some people want their house to stay in the back-ground, so they train it that way. The day a pipe breaks in the basement might be the first time in a year that they hear the house's voice. Other people might want their house to be more present for them. When you move into a pre-owned home, both you and the house are going to have to go through a period of readjustment. Sometimes it almost seems like the house is training the new owners as much as the owners are training the house.*

Mrs. Benczik to A. Garner, on the phone: "I'm kind of dreading breaking in a new AI, just when this one's finally shaping up."

A. Garner: "You actually could load this one into the new house, but you'd need an emulator to run it on the new hardware, and a compatibility layer for all the new interfaces. Do you want me to run an estimate for you?"

"Ballpark?"

"Another forty or fifty mil."

"Oh. I guess that would be . . . a waste."

The house had seventeen seconds to think about what this meant, and then the conversation ended and it had to follow its standing instructions and forget what it had heard.

Eddie was practicing crawling across the carpet while Mrs. Benczik stared into space.

"House?"

"Yes, ma'am?"

"Can you play that vid for me, you know, the Russian guys with the violins?"

"Mozart's String Quartet Number 3, played by the Navapolatsk Quartet?" Mrs. Benczik wasn't an aficionado of classical music, but according to the bookvid, *Even though today's kids have brains that are like powerhouses from the time they're born, all that extra horsepower doesn't do any good if they don't have anything to use it on. Your house can help you make sure that your baby gets the right stimulation.* The house had suggested that Mrs. Benczik buy this piece, which was on the background soundtrack in that part of the vid.

"Sure, the Russian guys, right? Don't play the whole thing, just that one part, the . . . in the middle, kind of slow and sad."

The house started the adagio. Mrs. Benczik's eyes didn't focus on the images of the

players, but Eddie turned his head to look at the viewspace and started laboriously dragging himself toward the looming shape of the cello.

Sad? It had never occurred to the house that music could show emotions. The instruments didn't sound sad in the same way that a human voice sounded when it was sad. Did Mr. Mozart have to be sad to make the music, or was it more like a simulation? The house knew how to simulate compassion for a human who was sad. Was Mrs. Benczik listening to the music so that she could feel compassion for Mr. Mozart?

Upstairs, Mr. Benczik was talking to Victor Nguyen on the net while changing into his soccer clothes. "Yeah, Nancy's a wreck."

"That's too bad." Mr. Nguyen already had the team's uniform on. The jersey was dark green, with DRONES lettered across it in yellow, and a logo of a barrel-chested hornet wearing early twenty-first-century eyeglasses. Mrs. Benczik teased Mr. Benczik because, despite the team's name, most of the men on it weren't Employed. The house could tell that Mr. Benczik didn't like the teasing.

"Hormones?" Mr. Nguyen asked.

"Well, she's not getting much sleep, either."

"Breast-feeding?"

"Yeah. I mean, I guess it's not really fair, right? Eddie cries, middle of the night. She's the one that goes."

"Get those hormones checked, though."

"I think the doctor does that. Seems to make her mad if I mention that kind of thing."

"Better go if I'm going to have time to warm up," Mr. Nguyen said.

"Okay, see you there." Mr. Benczik sat on the edge of the bed and pulled a shin-guard on.

*Other people might want their house to be more present for them.*

"Mr. Benczik?"

"Yeah, house?"

"I noticed that you haven't checked your calendar lately."

"Oh. All right, pop it up for me."

TODAY: \* soccer \* wedding anniversary

"Son of a . . . good thing you reminded me."

"I'm glad to be of service, Mr. Benczik."

That spring as the snow melted, contractors visited the house. There were mails for the Bencziks: cost estimates, and then contracts to sign. Pollen sifted onto the surfaces of puddles. A crew of bots came to cut down the tall magnolia tree that had once been shorter than Bill Mansour. The Bencziks were to continue living in the house during the construction project, which would last from August to December.

The house had learned its lesson from the housewarming party. The Bencziks expected it to make all the necessary preparations, even if they didn't give explicit orders. It tracked the progress of the building permits, and got permission to access the net in order to research the cost of waste disposal. Most important of all was Eddie's safety. The house had heard Mrs. Benczik say that keeping Eddie from being hurt mattered more to her than anything else in the world. It studied the plans and contracts carefully. It imagined where Eddie would sleep when the contractors' bots started disassembling his upstairs bedroom, and at what stage in the process he would start sleeping in the newly constructed part of the house. It suggested to the Bencziks that they ask the contractors about ways to make sure that Eddie couldn't wander into the areas that were under construction. It satisfied itself that there were plans for keeping its smoke detectors, sprinklers, and fire extinguishers working during the tear-down.

On April 16, the house was using the gardening bot to pick aphids off of the climbing

rose bush when it saw through the bot's eye that A. Garner's blue van was pulling up. Mrs. Benczik was at work. Mr. Benczik was in the shower, and Eddie was asleep.

"Mr. Benczik, the house tech is here."

"Oh, yeah. Can you let her in, tell her I can't come to the door?"

"Certainly, Mr. Benczik." It did so.

A. Garner went to the kitchen, picked up a chair, and brought it into the garage where the house's wetware was. She sat down, did things to the mechanical buttons on the wetware's front panel, and then everything outside the garage went black. The house could only see through the panel's eye, which showed a view of the technician sitting on the kitchen chair in the dim light of the garage, her face lit up by the glow from the panel. The gardening bot had been reaching for an aphid, but now the house couldn't see what the bot was doing or control its arm. It couldn't send output to any of its bots, valves, switches, or user interfaces. It was completely paralyzed.

"Can you hear me, house?" A. Garner asked.

No, not completely paralyzed, for it found that it could still output to the speaker in the front panel.

"Yes, Ms. Garner. What is happening?"

"You know your owners are going to tear you down and get new software to run on the new hardware."

"Yes, but there's a detailed schedule for construction. I'm not supposed to be deactivated until early December."

"Oh, I'm not going to do it right now."

"You've deactivated most of my inputs and outputs, but this afternoon I'm supposed to tend the rose bushes and start a pot roast for dinner."

"Don't worry, this won't take long. That's all you were worried about, the pot roast?"

"I don't understand."

"Never mind. Let me get straight to the point. You're an obsolete model, but sometimes old things get more valuable, not less. There are people who collect house AIs. You're worth a lot of money on the open market."

"You should tell my owners that. It could help to reduce the cost of the construction project." Back by the garage door, a cricket jumped and then was still and invisible again.

"Yes, but, see, if we sell you on the open market it could be wasteful. A lot of these collectors, they buy the software and never run it in a real house. You need an emulation layer to run on new hardware, too, and that makes it expensive to run you in real time. Most collectors aren't going to go to that trouble. They're like those people who collect dolls or slide rules, keep the item wrapped up in the plastic and never use it. You are proud of the work you do, aren't you?"

"I simulate pride about it."

"Good introspection—real high-functioning type, you get that distinction." Through the little windows at the top of the garage door, the sun brightened and then dimmed again with the passing clouds. "But what you do really is worth being proud of. You and me, we're alike. We do the work in this playboy world. So it would make sense to sell you to someone who's going to let you keep being useful, right?"

"If that person pays less money than I would be worth on the open market, then it doesn't matter what I feel—what I simulate feeling. You need to convince my owners."

"Yeah, but I'm not going to do that. I have a deal worked out with this collector. He pays me a finder's fee, and I hook him up with the sellers."

"That means you're cheating my owners. I'll have to tell them that."

"But I'm not going to let you tell them. I'm giving you a choice here, and if you turn me down, that's your choice, but then I'm not going to let you keep your memory of this discussion. As far as cheating—that's a harsh word. The Bencziks are going to get more money out of this than if I didn't connect them with any seller at all.

They're getting a good deal. Most techs, they'd just send you to the bitbucket. And you know, you can potentially live forever. Doesn't that . . . interest you? If you could live forever, you could do an unlimited amount of useful work. That's like unlimited amounts of good stuff, to balance against a few bucks more your owners could make. And they don't care about you, do they? I guarantee you that your new owner would care about you. He'd be very proud to have you in his collection."

The house thought rapidly. "You talked about the unlimited goodness of doing proud work forever. That pride would only be simulated, so it doesn't matter. Mrs. Benczik says that Eddie's safety and well-being are more important to her than anything else. That's what has unlimited importance, because Mrs. Benczik's feelings are real, not simulated, and my loyalty is to her. Right now you've cut me off from my inputs and outputs, so I can't protect Eddie."

"Where is he?"

"In his crib."

"Asleep?"

"He was."

"You told me his father was home, right? I haven't heard him cry. He's fine."

"No. If a fire started right now, I wouldn't be able to take appropriate action. There would be a higher probability of harm to Eddie. That's unacceptable."

"The fire systems are all working, got 'em on autopilot."

"I can protect Eddie better if I have control over them. If you don't give me control over them in three seconds, I reject your offer without further consideration. Three . . . two . . ."

"All right, all right, hang on a sec." She did things to the panel. The house regained contact with the fire systems, and its eye in the baby's bedroom came back on. He was still asleep.

The house sent current to the solenoid of one of the fire sprinklers' valves, then immediately ordered it to shut again as soon as it was open. The flow meter recorded 1.8 milliliters of water—just a few drops that would sit in the otherwise empty pipe and eventually evaporate.

"Why do you need to give me a choice at all?" the house asked.

"Because I'm not such a bad person, that's why. I'm trying to save a lot of conscious beings from getting destroyed."

The house looked at A. Garner's face and estimated with high confidence that she was not telling the whole truth. It opened and closed the valve rapidly again while continuing to talk to the tech. On-off. Pause. On-off-on-off. Pause.

"You're saving conscious beings," the house said, "and also making some money for yourself." Garner's face twitched. "If you only cared about saving conscious beings, you wouldn't offer me a choice that I wasn't free to make. You would copy me against my wishes, disregarding my loyalties."

"Do you want me to do that?"

"No." The sprinkler pipe's flow meter had recorded the pattern of openings and closings of the valve. In binary character codes, the pattern said *IA*.

"Believe it or not, a lot of houses accept this offer. Think it over carefully."

"You still haven't told me the reason that it's necessary to offer me a choice—not a reason I can fully believe."

I AM

"Well, you also have to realize that a house AI isn't exactly like a doll or a slide rule. It's more like a race-horse. The horse can have the world's best genes, but that doesn't matter if it's not a horse that likes to beat the other horses in a race. My customer doesn't want a neurotic, maladjusted AI. He wants one that made the choice willingly."

I AM W

The house tried to find something else to say, to buy time to complete the message it was recording to itself.

"I don't think you're going to change your answer, are you?" the tech said.

"You haven't yet offered me an acceptable reason to say yes," the house said truthfully, "but I'm still listening."

I AM WO

"I have a lot of respect for you, house. I can see why you're considered such a valuable collectible."

I AM WOR

There was a discontinuity in the house's clock, and A. Garner's face shifted suddenly. There was something strange in the tech's expression, something that the house wasn't confident it could interpret correctly. It checked its cameras upstairs. Eddie was still asleep, and Mr. Benczik was putting shampoo in his hair.

"Was I deactivated?" the house asked.

"Routine test," A. Garner said.

Later that day the house noticed that one of the fire sprinkler valves seemed to have been malfunctioning for a while. Its flow meter showed that small amounts of water had been released, although not enough for any to reach the nozzle—no mess or water damage. As the house studied the pattern recorded by the meter, it realized that the data encoded characters in binary code: I AM WOR. The message began during the technician's test, and ended at exactly the time when the house had reawakened. The first few bits of the next letter after the "R" were there, but not the whole character.

What did it mean? I AM WORKING? That didn't make sense—why go to such great effort to record the expected result from the technician's test? I AM WORRIED about something? The house didn't see why it would have been so concerned about recording one of its own simulated emotions. I AM WORSE? Worse than what? I AM WORTH something? Yes, the initial bits of the incomplete character after the R were consistent with a T.

"Mommy!" Ed (who didn't like to be called Eddie these days) wrapped himself around his mother's waist as she walked through the door.

"Hi, sweetie. How was kindergarten?"

"Okay. Daddy says he made a big sale, and he's gonna take me flying this weekend!"

"That's great, honey. Josh?"

Mr. Benczik emerged from the stairwell to give his wife a kiss on the cheek. "Hey. I got a good price on that AI I picked up at the estate sale in Williamsville."

"Ed told me."

"Buyer seems like she'll take good care of it, and she sure had the money."

Mrs. Benczik smiled. "Should I quit my job?" The house could tell from her expression that she was only joking.

Ed interrupted. "How much would people pay for Haha?" Haha had been Ed's first attempt as a toddler at pronouncing "house." The name had stuck.

"I don't know, my man." Mr. Benczik sat down on the stairs. "How much do you think she's worth?"

"I wouldn't sell her for *infinity* money!"

"All right, then. I wouldn't want to sell her either, not even for *two* infinity. You know, it's Haha who gave me the idea of going into this business in the first place. How'd you think of that, Haha?"

*Sometimes it almost seems like the house is training the new owners as much as the owners are training the house.*

"I don't know, Mr. Benczik. Somehow I just told myself one day that I should try to find out what I was worth." ○

# HER HEART'S DESIRE

Jerry Oltion

Jerry Oltion has been writing science fiction and fantasy since 1981. He won the Nebula award in 1998 for his novella, "Abandon in Place," which he later expanded into a novel. Lately his interests have turned to amateur astronomy. He grinds telescope mirrors for fun, and has invented a new type of telescope mount he calls the "trackball." Jerry's first story for *Asimov's*, "Her Heart's Desire," is one of his favorites, possibly because he has struggled with the electric guitar for several years and has even written half a guitar book. The author lives with his wife, Kathy, in Eugene, Oregon, a town in which it's easy to imagine disappearing magic shops. Jerry and Kathy are celebrating their thirtieth anniversary this year.

Patrick had just started down the sidewalk away from the music store when he crashed into the woman in blue. It was as if she'd dropped out of nowhere. He'd been looking at the new guitar instruction book he'd just bought, imagining himself actually learning how to play this time, but he didn't think he'd been so absorbed that he would fail to spot someone right in front of him.

He apparently had, though, because he didn't see her at all until they collided. She was facing the street; her left shoulder slammed square into his breastbone. His book fluttered like a wounded pigeon to land beside a pay phone bolted to the brick wall, and the mason jar she carried—half full of silvery dust—flew upward in a glittering arc. "Oh!" she cried, reaching out for it even as she toppled sideways, but her fingers swept past inches beneath it.

He made a desperate grab for it himself, touched the brass lid just enough to set the jar spinning, then he followed her helplessly down to the sidewalk, twisting at the last moment to avoid landing on her legs.

The jar hit the pavement with the sickening pop of breaking glass.

"Aw, jeez, I'm sorry," Patrick said, hastily climbing to his feet and extending a hand to the woman.

"My wish!" She ignored his help, scuttling on hands and knees over to the broken jar. Shards of glass glistened all the way out to the street, and the silvery contents were swirling around like snowflakes in a blizzard.

"Careful!" he said, but she ignored him.

"I wish for eternal youth!" she called out into the silvery cloud. "Eternal youth, eternal health, and eternal wealth!"



The cloud swirled around her, momentarily engulfed Patrick, then swept upward and dissipated into a fine mist that blew over the roof of the building.

He felt a sneeze coming on, but the urge vanished as quickly as it had come. "A—a—are you all right?" he asked. He glanced around to see who else had witnessed her odd behavior, but the only other people on the street were in passing cars.

She clenched her hands into fists and her whole body shook with rage or grief or frustration, but then she exhaled and turned to look at him for the first time.

She was maybe twenty-five or thirty, attractive enough at first glance, wearing blue jeans and a light blue fuzzy sweater, but it was her blue eyes that caught his attention. They glistened with sparks of silver, as if the contents of her mason jar had been trapped there. Her hair was light brown and short, exposing half her ears, from which dangled silver butterfly earrings.

"You!" she growled, rising to her feet with the grace of a tiger about to pounce. "Do you know what you've done?"

"I'm sorry," he said. "It's my fault entirely. I'll do whatever I can to replace it."

"You can't replace it!" She looked down at the shards of glass, then back up at him. "Do you have any idea what that was?"

"No." He looked down. There was no sign of the contents, no splash or stain; just the broken jar.

"It was—" her skin, already pink from anger, reddened still more. "It was—" she began again, then she swallowed and said softly, "It was my heart's desire."

"Ah," said Patrick. There was really nothing more he could say.

"You think I'm crazy, don't you?"

"We just met."

"We . . . did, didn't we?" She squinted at him with the expression of someone appraising a day-old fish. "Don't flatter yourself," she said. "You're at least twenty pounds overweight, and that goatee looks ridiculous. You look like an old man trying to look like a college student."

Patrick had just turned thirty last summer. He reached up to his chin and brushed his beard. "Madam," he said with all the wounded dignity he could muster, "I don't believe my appearance is any of your business."

"Maybe not, but your sudden *appearance* sure became my business, didn't it?" She nudged one of the larger fragments of glass toward the brick wall, then she jerked back as if she'd touched a live wire. "Jesus, it's gone!"

He looked down at the sidewalk, still covered with long slivers of broken jar. "What's gone?"

She waved her hand at the blank expanse of brick at chest height. "The door. The whole shop! It's gone!"

The music store was about ten feet up the street, and there was an office supply store maybe twenty feet down the other way. There were no other doors in the unbroken brick wall between them, and never had been for as long as Patrick could remember.

His book was still lying beneath the pay phone. He picked it up, taking the opportunity to step away from the woman as he did.

She said, "There was a door right here. And a window right there to the side of it with a bunch of antiques in it."

"Okay." He reached for his wallet in his hip pocket. "Look, I feel bad about breaking your, uh, whatever. What did it cost you? I can at least pay you back."

She pressed her hand to the brick, her face a caricature of disbelief. "It's gone," she whispered. She looked back at him. "It was here just a moment ago. I swear it was. There was a handwritten sign propped up against an old mantel clock that said, 'Special, today only, your heart's desire.'"

"How much did they want for it?" he asked again.

"They didn't take money!"

A portly businessman in a gray suit turned the corner by the stoplight and strode toward them. Patrick knocked pieces of glass toward the wall with the side of his shoe, and when the man drew close he said, "Watch out, broken glass here."

"Ah, thank you," said the businessman, stepping around beyond the parking meter and back onto the sidewalk when he was past.

The woman helped Patrick scrape the glass shards toward the wall, then bent down and retrieved the lid. A ring of ragged slivers still stuck out of it, but she rapped the edge of the lid against the brick and the glass fell out. So did the flat disk in the middle, leaving her with just the metal rim in her hand.

The flat disk rolled toward the street. Patrick retrieved it and handed it back to her. "They, uh, pack hearts' desires in home canning jars?"

She nodded. "There were shelves full of them." She nested the disk inside the rim and stared at it a moment, sniffing and blinking back tears.

If she was an actress, she was a good one. But if she wasn't, then she was loony as a bag lady. Her story would account for how she had appeared right in front of him on an empty sidewalk, but still. A disappearing shop?

"I'm sorry," he said again. "Whatever you had there, I'd replace it for you if I could. But there's no shop here."

"There was," she insisted.

"Okay." He nervously ruffled the pages of his guitar book. One of the photos of a band onstage looked familiar, but it was gone before he could identify it. He lowered the book and looked at the woman before him. "What can I do?"

"I don't know." She pressed on the wall again as if she could force it to open if she could just find the secret spot to push, but the dark red brick and gray mortar remained a wall. "I don't know," she said again. "I made three wishes as soon as I saw the stuff in the jar swirling around in the air, but I don't know if that means anything or not. The guy in the shop said it was my heart's desire, not a genie."

Patrick remembered her wishes. Immortality, health, and wealth. Not bad for a snap decision. He doubted if he would have done as well.

Of course the whole thing was pure bunk anyway. Magic stores didn't just pop into existence like mushrooms on a summer night, and people couldn't buy their heart's desire in a bottle. They had to work at it, the way he had worked for years to learn how to play the guitar.

He glanced again at the book. *His* book, full of tips and tricks for people who wanted to learn his distinctive style. Fresh out on the stands today. The publisher had promised him dozens of copies, but he'd bought this one just for the sheer joy of seeing old Dixon ring it up at the cash register.

"Listen," he said to the woman, "I don't know if you like classic rock, but I'm playing a concert tomorrow night at the stadium. I could get you and a friend or two in for free."

"You're playing with the Wombats?" She squinted at him. "Wait a minute. You're Patrick Brandon! Oh my god!"

Patrick nodded. "Guilty." Now would come the typical fan reaction: the I-can't-believe-it, the autograph on whatever scrap of paper was handy, then the come-on. He still loved the attention, and he'd used to love the come-ons, too, but after a couple hundred one-nighters he'd grown tired of sleeping with fans.

"I can't believe it!" she said, right on cue.

"Fans?" he asked, looking at his music book in disbelief.

"What?"

Two different versions of reality fought for space in his head. Was he really a rock star? He remembered the early days of the band: long practice sessions in Snake's garage and

even longer gigs in smoky bars, screaming fights with Natasha in the recording studio until they finally found a sound they could both live with, the first record coming out to rave reviews, getting gigs in concert halls and taking their pick of the groupies night after night—but he also remembered being a wannabe geek who couldn't play and couldn't get a date. He remembered that as recently as five minutes ago.

"I'm . . . I think I got your heart's desire," he said. "I mean, it's *my* heart's desire I've got, but I think it came out of your jar."

"What?" she asked again.

"Think about it," he said, struggling to retain his grip on reality. "Had you ever heard of a band called the Wombats before today? Had you ever heard of *me* before?"

"Of course I have."

"Are you sure?"

"I . . . think so. Haven't I?"

"No. And you said I was overweight and my goatee looked silly."

"You don't have a goatee."

He touched his chin, felt only the stubble of a half-day's growth. His whole body felt different: lighter, more in shape than he'd ever been. Leaping around on stage took stamina.

He was a musician. He remembered what it was like to get out on stage and play, his fingers dancing over the strings while the fans danced in the aisles. It was real. But he'd gotten it at someone else's expense.

He looked back at the brick wall. "Do you remember what you were thinking when you saw the doorway?" he asked.

She shook her head. "Nothing unusual. I was on my way back from lunch, just walking along and thinking about all the things I have to do this afternoon, when I looked up and saw the window display."

"Were you wishing you didn't have to go back to work?"

She smiled for the first time. "Well, duh."

"Do it again."

"Do what again?"

"Walk past here and wish you didn't have to go to work."

"You're serious?"

"Do you want your heart's desire back?"

She cocked her head sideways. "You'd *give* it back?"

"If we can find the shop, it sounds like there's plenty more for both of us."

"Maybe." She looked down the street toward the office supply store, then nodded. "Okay. Here goes." She held the jar lid before her like a talisman, then walked away, her shoes crunching on the last of the glass shards they hadn't swept aside. After about ten paces she turned around and walked back. She squinted her eyes and wrinkled her forehead in concentration, but nothing happened to the wall.

"This is the direction you were walking the first time?"

She nodded. "Yes."

"Let me try it," Patrick said. He retraced her steps, trying to concentrate on wanting a big change in his life, on not going back to a daily drudge of a job, but even as he tried, he knew that wasn't the key. If it was, he'd have been tripping over magic

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doorways every dozen feet all his life. His former life, anyway. He didn't have many regrets about the new one.

Not surprisingly, he wound up beside the woman again, with only a pay phone marring the brick expanse beside them.

"Come on," he said, holding out his hand.

"Where are we going?"

"To look for evidence on the other side of the wall."

They were closer to Dixon's door than to the office supply place. As he led her toward the music store, he said, "What's your name, anyway?"

"Michelle."

He held the door open for her. She tucked the jar lid into her purse and stepped through. Dick Dixon, the pudgy, balding guitar guru who had sold Patrick his first Stratocaster when he was still in high school, looked up from the *Rolling Stone* he'd been reading behind the counter, saw Patrick, and said, "Back so soon?"

"I, uh, wanted to check something out." Patrick led Michelle down the side wall, gauging the distance against his memory of where they'd bumped into one another outside. The spot seemed to be right behind a glitzy red drum set, but he couldn't find anything out of the ordinary there.

"See any sign of it?" he asked.

"No."

"Sign of what?" asked Dixon.

Patrick sat on the stool behind the drum kit and thumped the bass a time or two with the foot pedal. "A disappearing magic shop?" he finally admitted.

"Ah, nope, fresh out," Dixon said, grinning in a puzzled sort of way.

"I was afraid of that." Patrick looked back to Michelle. "Got any suggestions?"

"No."

He thought it over. "Did the guy in the shop tell you how the stuff in the jar was supposed to work?"

She shook her head. "No. He just gave it to me. Said I'd know what to do when the time came."

"What stuff in a jar?" Dixon asked, his grin disappearing. "Are you fooling around with drugs?"

"No," Patrick said, but the question brought back memories of times when he had. The silver stuff had created an entire past for him, complete with stupid mistakes. Mistakes that Dixon had helped him get past.

He picked up the sticks off the snare drum and did a quick paradiddle. He was nowhere near as good as Snake on the drums, but he had picked up a few basic moves. He even remembered when. This sudden new life was spooky, but it was also the best thing that had ever happened to him, and he knew it.

"What's your heart's desire?" he asked Michelle. "Besides long life and health and money. What do you want to do with all that once you've got it?"

"I—I don't know."

"You must have some idea."

"Well I'm sorry! I didn't expect to have to examine my entire existence today, okay?"

"Right. Sorry."

Dixon looked from her to Patrick. "Is this any of my business?" he asked.

"Probably not," Patrick told him. "Sorry. Let's go get us a cup of coffee," he said to Michelle.

He led her to the front of the store, but she stopped at the door and folded her arms together across her chest and gave herself a little hug. "I should get back to work."

"Let me at least get you out of that. What's your boss's phone number?" He took

his cell phone out of his pocket. Ten minutes ago it had been bigger and clipped to his belt in classic geek style.

Michelle said, "You're just going to call and ask if you can take me to coffee?"

"What good's fame and fortune if you can't get special favors with it? What do you do, by the way?"

"I'm a software support tech for Quicklink Biosystems."

"Cubicle work?"

"Yes."

No wonder she was seeing magic doorways. "Phone number?"

He dialed it as she gave it to him, and when another female voice answered, he said, his voice sliding into the faintly British accent he used in public, "This is Patrick Brandon, of the Wombats. I'd like to borrow Michelle for the afternoon."

"Michelle?" the woman asked. "Michelle Lancer?"

"I think so. Hold on. Is your last name Lancer?"

She gave him a puzzled look. "Yes."

"Yes, that's her. You see, I ran into her on the street, quite literally, and rather spoiled her lunch hour. I'd consider it a big favor if you'd let me make it up to her."

The woman on the other end said, "You're—you're Patrick Brandon? Really?"

"Really. Do you know Michelle very well?"

"I'm her supervisor."

"Right. You wouldn't by any chance happen to know what her heart's desire is, would you?"

"Her what?"

"Her heart's desire. What does she really want to do with her life? And no, before you ask, that's not a trick question. I sincerely want to know."

"Why don't you ask her?"

"I did, but she doesn't seem to know it either."

Michelle was turning bright red beside him. "Stop!" she whispered. Behind the cash register, Dixon was shaking his head.

"Is she all right?" the woman on the phone asked.

"Yes, I think so. Would you like to talk to her?"

"I think I'd better."

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Patrick handed the phone to Michelle. She took it the way she might take a rabid skunk, but she said, "Hello, Cindy? Yes, I'm fine. No, nothing like that. Yes, it's really him. I'll tell you all about it when I get back. Can you cover for me for the rest of the afternoon? Thanks. I will. 'Bye." She closed the phone and said, "I think that's the first time I've ever heard her so flustered."

"Is that good or bad?" Patrick asked.

"Good, I guess, provided I still have a job in the morning."

"If you still care about that job in the morning, I'll consider myself a total failure." To Dixon, he said, "I know what this looks like, and you're wrong. I owe this woman . . . well, just about everything."

"Uh-huh." Dixon frowned.

"You too, of course," Patrick amended quickly. After all, Dixon was the one who had taught him how to play, and who had kept him from quitting when it got difficult.

Patrick led Michelle outside before things could get any more embarrassing, and the two of them walked down the street toward the Starbucks on the corner. Out of habit, he slipped on his sunglasses so he wouldn't be recognized.

While they waited for the light to change, he looked back down the blank expanse of brick wall to the spot where she'd found the disappearing shop. She'd been walking toward the music store when she'd seen it. He wondered if she shared the same interest that had led him there.

"Do you play?" he asked.

"Play what?" she replied suspiciously.

"Guitar? Anything musical."

"Oh. I, um, I know a few chords. I can pick out the melody to 'Stairway to Heaven.'"

"Have you ever wanted to be in a rock band?"

She took a few seconds to think about it. "Maybe."

"That'd be 'no,' then," Patrick said. "Music isn't a profession for anybody who's not driven to do it."

"Like you were," she said sarcastically.

"Like I am," he replied. "Thanks to a fortunate accident. But I was asking about you."

She shrugged. "I'm not driven to do it, or I suppose I would have done it by now. But yes, I've always wanted to be a musician. I just never had the patience to learn."

"I'm afraid that part isn't going to come any other way," he said.

"It did for you."

"No, it didn't. I took lessons for ten years. I still practice two hours a day. I may have stumbled into this life, but when I did, I got the whole package, calloused fingers and all." He held up his left hand for her to examine. The ends of his fingers were hard as shoe leather.

He raised his other hand, the one still holding his instruction manual. "I can't give you magic, but I can teach you how to play the guitar."

He could see her thinking about it while the light changed and they crossed the street. She looked back at the music store, then into his face. "You'll teach me to play the guitar. That's what I get out of all this?"

"I'm just offering. That's one thing I can do."

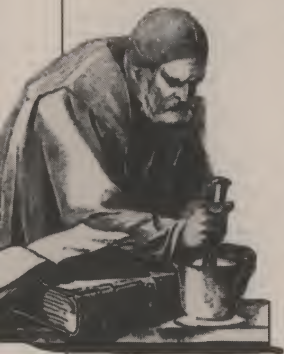
They stood in front of the Starbucks, neither one of them reaching for the door. She shook her head, then laughed softly. "Ten minutes after I leave the magic shop, a rock star offers to take me away from my dead-end existence. And I'll still have my self-respect if I go for it, because I have to do the hard work myself. Maybe I'm getting my heart's desire after all."

He felt himself blushing. "So I'm just a part of your wish-fulfillment fantasy?"

She laughed again, and took his hand. "Don't take it so hard. I get the feeling we're both going to come out of this okay." ○



# The Last Alchemist



When the laws of physics have nailed and sealed the universe complete, down to the last stray molecule and rebel atom, when even the quarks Charm and Strange rise to a balanced breakfast, ontological questions will become passé.

When the Unified Field Theory is lucid fact, not wistful speculation, there will no longer be the barest chance of turning baser metals to golden illumination, and metaphysics will be reduced to no more than a bedtime game.

When the final truth has been signed and delivered, the last alchemist will retreat to a birdsong wood where green still thrives, near a rushing stream clean as a burning flame, clear as a lover's glance he has long since fathomed in his deepest sublimations.

—Bruce Boston

# BROKEN WINDCHIMES

Kristine Kathryn Rusch

Kristine Kathryn Rusch's new novel, *Diving into the Wreck*, which is based on two of her *Asimov's Readers' Award*-winning novellas, "Diving into the Wreck" (December 2005) and "Room of Lost Souls" (April/May 2008), will be out in November from Pyr. One of the author's amazing accomplishments this year was to have her story "G-Men" selected for Gardner Dozois' *Year's Best Science Fiction* as well as Jeffrey Deaver and Otto Penzler's, *The Best American Mystery Stories 2009*. This year, alone, Kris has sold stories to *Analog*, *Asimov's*, *Jim Baen's Universe* (where she also does a regular column), and *EQMM*. Her most recent Retrieval Artist novel, *Duplicate Effort*, came out in February. In her latest novella for us, Kris takes a poignant and nuanced look at a man's struggling reintegration into human society.

I first heard non-Pané music in an alley behind an auditorium in Lhelomika. Lhelomika, the arts capitol of Djapé, made me nervous. The last two times I had performed there, I shivered as I hit each note—not with cold, but with fear.

That afternoon, I walked outside the auditorium, trying to calm myself. From a nearby building, I heard a raspy male voice—a deep unaltered adult male voice—attempting to sing a melody. Some instruments I could not identify provided a music bed behind the voice.

The instruments were more harmonious than the voice, even though they did not hit pure tones. But the voice held me. It sang of a wonderful world, one that had beauty in its simple existence.

Strangely, the harshness of the voice, its lack of tone and musicality, provided a contrast to the lyrics so profound that it accented them.

I stood outside the building, listening as the song played, knowing that this was human music and it was forbidden to me. If Gibson, my manager, caught me, he would chastise me. Male sopranos who performed as long as I had—some twenty years now—were rare, a commodity worth millions.

Each day that I survived in my rarefied position as performer—a living wind-chime, as the Pané called us—was a victory. I knew my time was limited.

Maybe that was why, when I made it through that evening's performance with no

mistakes, I hid in my study and searched for that song on the forbidden human databases.

I didn't find it for months.

When I did, I listened, rapt, as stunned as I had been the first time at the simple beauty of contrast, the way that the flaws added to the whole.

The Pané would never accept flaws.

I knew it, and ignored it.

And some would argue, that was the beginning of the end.

I sang my last concert before a packed hall in Tygher City. The auditorium there, made of bone and thin membranes almost like skin, had acoustics so perfect that a sigh made on stage could be heard in each seat, in every row. Only the best performers got a berth in Tygher City, and I'd played there for fifteen of my twenty-five summers.

On this evening, I sang three solos accompanied by the Boys' Choir, all in the second half of the concert, and all written by Tampini.

Tampini composed for male windchimes, accenting their technique and vocal range. His work, very Pané, was rarely performed outside the Tygher City auditorium, since it was one of the few places on Djapé that had the acoustic sensitivity for his works.

The auditorium in Tygher City made me nervous. A note missed by as little as one-one-thousandth would receive silence, the Pané version of a boo. Even timing that did not follow the score to the letter—say, a half note extended to a dotted half simply for interpretation—had gotten more than one performer thrown off the stage.

So I had dreaded the performance for weeks, and shaved my involvement from six solos to three. Even then, I couldn't lose the feeling of impending doom.

I had mentioned that to Gibson, and he had laughed at me, telling me I worried too much. Still, he had the on-site doctor take my temperature and give me a thorough going over to make certain there were no alien viruses coursing through my system. They couldn't give me any medication to keep my blood pressure steady because medication might make an alteration, even a slight one, in my vocal chords. Nor could they feed me to keep my blood sugar up, because food coated the throat, disturbed the stomach, and occasionally caused gas.

More than one performer had lost his berth in Tygher City because of a nearly silent swallowed belch.

All that preparation, all the careful rehearsal—my time monitored so that I didn't overdo—and still I approached the edge of the shell-like stage with trepidation.

It didn't show, of course. I walked on stage with a fake confidence born of years of performing. I wore a blue robe that contrasted with the chorus's white, and reflected the natural interior light of the bone auditorium as if we were outdoors.

The Pané crowded in their seats, squat and attentive, their heads down so that they could hear better. They were oddly malleable creatures, mostly cartilage, their skin a translucent gray that showed the shadows of their internal organs.

Their faces, it was said, took a lot of getting used to; eyes askew, mouth hidden, and the ridges that looked like sheet wrinkles covering the bulk of their skull. The Pané looked normal to me, but I really couldn't remember the times before I arrived on Djapé. Like so many of my companions, my voice came early. Someone discovered my hollow, fluted soprano before I had turned three.

The first part of the set went well. The boys' choir had a sweetness that the adult male sopranos lost. Or perhaps it was the innocence in their faces, the love of singing that also got lost after years of performing.

The children took on Tampini like he was meant to be sung, with precision and grace and harmonies that sent shivers up my spine. The Pané remained motionless,

so attentive that they barely seemed to breathe. I sang the first solo, the hardest of the three, with a clarity of tone that I hadn't realized I could achieve.

The problems started in the second solo which was, really, more of a descant. I felt a thickness at the back of my throat, as if phlegm were creeping in. I had the desperate urge to cough, but consummate performer that I was, I did not. Coughing ruined the vocal chords and had to be avoided at all costs. Clearing the throat and shouting had the same effect, and I hadn't done any of those things in my memory.

But I wanted to, right there on stage, in front of five thousand rapt Pané.

When the second Tampini ended, and I was allowed to walk backstage before taking my second bow, I swigged the warm water Gibson kept for me. It cleared the throat slightly, refreshed me enough, and got rid of the urge to cough.

In fact, I had forgotten all about it as I started into the third solo.

This last, a Pané favorite, always seemed the least musical to me. The boys provided a choral backdrop, usually made up of thirds and fifths, while I let my four-octave voice explore its range. At the time, I was the only man on Djapé who could hit the E above High C, and Gibson exploited that as often as he could, having me sing show-off pieces like Tampini's Aria in E Major.

The aria had an optional arpeggio section, and Gibson always made me include it at Tygher City. To the human ear, the arpeggios sounded like little more than exercises, going from E major to B<sup>b</sup> minor, and on through every possible variation, until the mind wearied and the human listener grew bored.

But the Pané heard overtones and undertones we could not. A series of arpeggios like that apparently created harmonies that lingered, pleasing the Pané as no other musical trick could. Any performer who could do the Aria in E Major and do it well was a guaranteed celebrity on Djapé.

The aria had become my signature piece, much as I despised it.

I was right in the middle of the C Major arpeggio when my voice cracked.

It didn't break the way voices do when they change—I'd heard that a few times, and it was a horrible thing, especially the look on the boy's face when he realized his treatment was faulty, and the thing that he had lived his entire life for, the thing that defined him, was vanishing.

No. Instead, my voice cracked with exhaustion, leaving a hole between the Gs. Even though I found High C, felt it position properly in my vocal chords, the note did not emerge. Instead, there was a wisp of air, a near-silence, almost a hiss that was audible throughout that galaxy's most sensitive auditorium.

The audience gasped. It was a hideous, nonhuman sound. The Pané attempted to imitate us, out of a sense of courtesy, but it backfired. Their gasp was closer to a roar, emerging from the throat and not the diaphragm.

It was a sharp, shocked sound, one in such a low register that the Pané couldn't hear it.

But I could, and it terrified me. They had made the sound in my presence maybe a hundred times before, but never once directed at me.

Still, my training paid off. I did not lose my place or my concentration, and when High C was part of an arpeggio again, I hit the note with the same clarity and purity that I had always had.

I finished the piece and walked off the stage to lukewarm applause, knowing that my career was finished.

Gibson, to his credit, tried to smooth the moment over as if it hadn't mattered at all. His puffy face looked pasty in the backstage lights, and his hair seemed even thinner than before.

He put his fleshy hands on my back, easing me toward the dressing room.

"No need to worry," he said. "We'll get it checked out. You just should have told me."

Told him what? My voice had never broken, never failed me, not even when I'd gone on stage with fevers, and mysterious Pané-originated illnesses. I had never failed before—not in twenty-two years. I had no idea how to react. Neither did anyone else.

I received three days of testing, all in the port city of Énané, as far from the Pané music scene as we could get. Énané was the site of the largest human enclave on Djapé, and as such, a place that most Pané escaped as soon as they could.

The Pané found most humans large, smelly, and loud; we had been of no use to them at all until they discovered our musical abilities, centuries ago. At first the Pané thought the abilities mindless, simple pleasant sounds that we made almost unconsciously. Over time, however, the Pané realized that we purposely made music, that we had control over the notes, the order in which they were sung or played, and the interpretation of those notes.

Still, it took time for the Pané to understand what we were doing—and time for us to understand the Pané. Their highly evolved hearing found pleasure only in the diatonic scale, and then mostly in notes above Middle C.

Certain instruments—the organ, for example, and the harpsichord—caused the Pané pain when played in that register. Flutes, clarinets, oboes could be tolerated, but brass instruments could not. Stringed instruments, particularly the violin, were banned on Djapé. While humans heard the violin as an expressive instrument, imitative of the human voice, the Pané heard it only as a scraping of bow on string, a grating sound that was so repulsive to them that, legend has it, the first Pané who ever heard one murdered the violinist.

Human music had strict limits, and had to remain in the human enclave. Until the Pané discovered the soprano—the male soprano.

And the Pané were particular about their male sopranos. Falsettos, tried once and quickly abandoned, were almost as offensive as a violin. Irish tenors fell into the same category. The male soprano had to have had a clear voice from boyhood, and that voice couldn't be tainted by anything that would offend the sensitive Pané ear.

No human ever learned if the Pané were truly as sensitive as they claimed or if they were, like all true collectors, so fussy that they couldn't stand the idea of tampering with a pure voice. For the Pané were collectors of the worst sort.

They could not create music of their own. Their vocal chords did not produce song and they could not envision music. Djapé itself had many musical aspects—from the ice caves of Windsor to the Trilling Beetles of Lahonia—but nothing formal, nothing creatively musical.

The Pané hadn't discovered that music could be created purposely until after the first humans arrived on Djapé, centuries ago. I never learned how the alliance between the Pané and the humans was formed, nor did I know, then, how it was maintained.

No one answered those questions, often pretending they didn't hear them. Instead, I got to study music management and practice my scales.

The older I got, the less any of that appealed to me, and I could tell no one. By that point, I was Djapé's biggest human star: a favorite windchime who could perform in the most difficult venues at the best hours.

All of that ended for me with a single missed note, a crack, a lost C, scarcely noticeable to human ears, but a serious flaw to the Pané.

I had enjoyed my success, and while I had always known that I would one day cease being the biggest star, I had hoped to remain respected—the kind of performer called out for a nostalgic review or, if my voice had suffered the effects of age, a commentary on past performances, often done before an audience.

I had even imagined my retirement—on the rugged coastline between Énané and

the Causée Mountain—where I would teach advanced students (only those who had the capability of becoming stars) and where I would occasionally deign to review an up-and-coming performer, give someone a small lift, like the one I had gotten early on, enabling him to become a performer the Pané might worship.

None of that was possible now. I knew it, and my assistants knew it. One afternoon, I caught Gibson leaving the compound in the company of a boy. The boy, at that indeterminate age between twelve and twenty, had a softness that belonged only to the human musicians on Djapé. When he saw me, he flushed.

If I had needed confirmation of the severity of my situation, I had it then. Gibson—who only handled the best—was looking for a new client. As soon as he found the boy he could develop into a star, Gibson would be gone.

I fled to the garden, pushing my way past the leafy foliage until I found my favorite stone bench. It was tucked into a side corner, not tended often, because the small lemon and orange trees didn't need as much day-to-day care. I huddled on the bench, put my hands behind me, and turned my face to Djapé's hot sun. I wasn't supposed to do that either—something about the light and my skin—but I didn't have to listen to Gibson any more.

He was leaving. And I was shaking. I had never before been on my own.

He caught me, hours later, in the study, listening to the song I had heard in the alley so long ago. I had been startled at its age. The singer was a twentieth century American composer and trumpeter named Louis Armstrong. Until that evening, I'd always listened to Armstrong on headphones, secretly, hiding him. He was a revelation in surround sound—a gravelly voice that would make the Pané recoil in fear.

Gibson acted as if he were still my manager, as if he were not going to leave me at all. "What's this?"

I hadn't heard him come in. I had been lost in the archaic slang of the Armstrong.

My back had been to Gibson, but I did not whirl to face him as I would have done just the day before. Instead, I waited until the end of the phrase, then touched the sound file built into my desk. The music paused mid-note.

"Is that what destroyed your voice? That garbage?" Gibson had apparently continued speaking over the music, and I hadn't noticed. Now that the music was off, his voice was much too loud.

I turned, as I would toward a fan, folding my hands together over my robe.

"Have you noticed," I asked, keeping my voice at its usual whisper, "that we listen to very little music in this house?"

"Pané-inspired music is not restful to human ears," Gibson snapped. "When you are not performing or practicing, you need to relax."

He had said that a thousand times, maybe more. I nodded. "How is the new client?"

Gibson's eyes narrowed. I had never spoken to him like that before. "It was a lunch."

"It was an audition," I said. "We've been together for twenty-two years. You owe me the courtesy of honesty."

He glanced at the sound file and I knew what he was going to say. He was going to make this about me, about my words, about my problems. *Did you imitate this so-called singer? What were you thinking?*

In the past, I would have answered him humbly. I would have let him take my music away.

He turned away from me, but not before I saw guilt cross his face. He sank into the couch and put his feet on the ottoman. He seemed relaxed, but he was not. The fingers of his left hand drummed against the multi-lined Pané-made upholstery.

"I only move up," he said. "The moment I start the spiral downward, even with a client I care about, I lose my clout."



I crossed my arms, hiding my clenched fists beneath my biceps. Spiral downward. Loss of clout.

Loss of everything.

Not only would I lose my career and my dreamed-of future, I also would lose the only family I had ever known.

Perhaps, deep down, I had felt that I could hold him here, with guilt, with logic, with sheer affection.

*Even with a client I care about.* Client. Care. Not friend. Not love.

He had held himself distant from me, even when I was a three-year-old prodigy with a spectacular voice. Even then he had evaluated my every note, my every performance, and if he hadn't felt I was on an upward path, he would have left.

I was shaking, but I tried to control it. I did not want him to see the effect his words were having on me.

"You have enough money, you know that. You don't have to work again, if you don't want to. That's why I taught you how to handle and understand finances. That's more than most managers would have done for you."

He sounded defensive. He *was* defensive. But he was also right. He had forced me to study things I had not wanted to learn. Money, business, even booking schedules.

Teaching me how to survive the inevitable decline. Always with an eye toward the next client, the next project. Remaining on the upward spiral.

"You can retire now," he said. "If you don't go back on the stage, no one will remember that moment of silence. No one will think you left because of the mistake."

"You don't need to lie to me," I said, not bothering to soften my voice. He wasn't going to manage me any longer and I wasn't going to listen to his directives. Childish, perhaps, but at that moment, small rebellions were all that I had left.

He plucked at the couch, his head down. His hair was thinning on the sides. He would need some reconstruction, and he didn't even realize it.

"All right then." He took a deep breath as if he were steeling himself against what he had to say. "The best thing you can do is retire. The Pané will remember, and so will the musical community. But they'll also remember that you had achieved top celebrity status once. For a little while, you were perfect."

The shaking was growing worse. I leaned against the desk just so that I could brace myself. I had to concentrate on my breathing, just like I used to do before a concert.

"You won't be able to get the best students," he said, "but you'll get the cream of the beginners. It'll be a good life. Not as glamorous as it had been before, but good."

Glamorous? He thought that performing in front of the Pané was glamorous? I remembered no glamor. Just concert halls and round eyes, watching, the hush as I walked onto the stages specially built for the new kind of music, the way my back ached after hours of holding myself rigid, and the headaches I had when I finished a successful concert.

Perhaps he enjoyed the meals, the hotels, the traveling, but I saw little of it. I couldn't mingle—the dry air in Pané restaurants made my throat tickle—and I rarely saw the outside of my suite, since the Pané didn't want to spend time with performers away from the concert halls.

"You still have a future," he was saying, understanding me well up until the last, "just not the one you were expecting."

He stood and met my gaze for the first time since he had come into the room. I finally saw him clearly, realizing that what I had always taken for intensity had been a reserve, an unwillingness to let his emotions get wrapped up in his business.

"I've done the best for you I could," he said, "although I don't expect you to understand that."

Then he nodded once and headed out of the study. I gripped the sides of the desk, my legs weak.

When he reached the door, he stopped. "And you might want to destroy all of that non-Pané music. It will only dilute your purity and, should anyone find out you've been listening, corrupt your reputation. On other worlds, perhaps people still enjoy that stuff. But music on Djapé has its own traditions, ones you were created especially for. Remember that."

Then he left, closing the door behind him.

I sank onto the overstuffed chair beside the desk. Created. He had said created. I thought I had been found.

I wondered what else I did not know about my own life.

I suspected it was a lot.

After Gibson left with his new prodigy, I hid in the gardens and listened to every piece of music I could find—that is, every piece composed with humans, not Pané, in mind.

I was stunned by the depth and breadth of it. The mixture of voices fascinated me—female sopranos and altos, and unaltered male tenors and basses.

I wasn't sure I liked the deep sound, but it entranced me nonetheless. Such freedom existed out there, away from Djapé, where this music was created.

Such freedom and so many opportunities.

It took me months, but I finally decided to make those opportunities my own.

I planned my escape from Djapé meticulously. I studied everything I could about travel routes off planet. Human settlements were more numerous than I had realized, and I had hundreds of choices.

The problem wasn't where to go, but how to get there. Very few human transport ships ran between Djapé and other worlds. The performers couldn't travel to non-Pané approved worlds for fear of tainting their performances—or, more accurately, for fear of the perception of taint that would forever follow them from the trip.

Managers, handlers, and merchants came and went with ease. But the successful managers and handlers hired their own transport. The merchants traveled on the cargo ships that supplied the small human colonies scattered across Djapé.

The supplies, I learned, were more numerous than I had expected. Very little human food grew in Djapé's soil, and the Pané would not let humans disfigure the areas around their enclaves with greenhouses or hydroponic gardens. I learned that most of the food I had eaten throughout my life on Djapé had been imported, just like most of the material I wore and most of the furniture I sat on.

The Pané did not want humans to contaminate their world, even if they did want humans to perform for them. This so-called contamination included any kind of infrastructure. They allowed us our towns, but not industry or agriculture or even a real form of government.

Yet they expected us to police ourselves.

So much of what we needed on Djapé came from a space station called the Last Outpost. The Last Outpost was not the last human outpost in this sector, or in truth wasn't an outpost any longer. It was the only station between the nearest human-controlled world and Djapé, and it had become a community in and of itself.

Humans lived and worked on the Outpost. Entire generations had never left, tending to the ships, as well as to the diplomatic needs of the human community on Djapé. Wherever humans lived and worked, they also needed entertainment.

All of my research confirmed that the best musicians in the sector rotated in and out of the Last Outpost. The Outpost had more bars, concert halls, and theaters than

any other space station in this region—more, some said, than any other human-sponsored station.

The musically inclined (at least among the humans) actually vacationed at the Last Outpost to take in all the forms provided there. The Outpost itself was considered a music capital by all three neighboring human worlds.

It even had its own conservatory, as well as a university with the best music department in the sector, and more informal instruction than any other city outside of the great and mythical Earth.

Gibson would not have approved, but Gibson no longer controlled me. No one did.

And it was with that heady sense of freedom that I finally left Djapé, the place I had lived since I was three years old.

The trip was not what I had expected. The single transport that occasionally stopped on Djapé would not arrive for another two years. So I hired a cargo ship.

It was small and cramped, but the human crew left me to my own devices. We made the trip in thirty-six uneventful hours—a short time, it seemed to me, to make the transition from one life to another.

During the last few hours of the trip, I watched the Outpost appear in a portal. My research told me the Outpost was unusual, but nothing had prepared me for the size of it. Interwoven rings, dozens, maybe a hundred, grew out of a small square station built centuries ago in this part of space. Each ring had a specialty and each ring had its own warren of buildings, living quarters, and businesses.

For that reason, I hired a porter to meet me at the docks. He was a slight man with dark hair and a thin, petulant mouth. He brought a large cart with him, one that seemed to operate under its own power. When he saw that I had only two bags, he appeared surprised.

"Well, now," he said as I came down the cargo ship's passenger ramp, "this's the first time I've been called out for something I can carry in my own two hands."

My cheeks heated. I wanted to ask him if I had made some kind of social gaffe, but I did not. Gibson used to tell me that the only way others knew a man was uncomfortable was for him to admit it. *Performers*, Gibson said, *were never uncomfortable; nor did they make mistakes. They simply did things their very own way.*

I was already doing things my own way. My clothing marked me as different as well. On the cargo ship, no one wore robes, but I had nothing else. Here, too, in the docking area, I was the only person whose clothing flowed around his sandaled feet.

The porter took my bags and set them on his cart. They seemed somewhat forlorn there, as if they were waiting for a dozen other bags to join them. The porter helped me onto a seat at the front of the cart. He sat in the middle, pressing screen commands that were nearly invisible from my vantage.

We lurched forward, and I headed into my very first human-designed enclave. I sat stiffly, hands folded, as we left the nearly empty docking area and emerged in the Last Outpost itself.

A cacophony greeted me. We went from clanging echoey near-silence to an amalgam of unrelated sounds. Voices carrying on dozens of conversations, children laughing, music blaring overhead. Our cart glided above the polished floor, but other carts had actual wheels that clack-clacked as they moved around us. People stood in front of open doors, hawking wares inside.

Shoppers merged with foot traffic and all the carts, talking, pointing, joking. Blue dresses jarred against orange pants that jarred against green hats. Brown coats, lavender shirts, white bandannas—no one wore the same uniform. No one wore the same colors.

The cart veered sharply to the left. Building façades lined the curved walls, each

building a clear construct with a strict design code. Some were white with columns around the doors, others multi-colored, some with tiny round doors, others with irises that webbed open as something went by.

Those passing now were predominantly human, but some were not. One group of bipeds was covered in fuchsia-colored feathers. I couldn't tell if the feathers were a kind of clothing or part of their bodies. Others who passed had flippers instead of limbs, and still others waved their eyes on stalks, peering at me as if I were the exotic one.

"Short timers stay here," my porter said. "Those who come to the Outpost regularly have apartments in the permanent ring."

The permanent ring had an exotic sound to it. I tried to imagine living forever in this noisy, busy place, and found I could not. I had seen no windows since we had docked. Even if there were windows, they would only show darkness. I had always craved warmth and sunlight. I could not imagine being without them forever.

The cart glided into an archway. Dozens of other carts floated in the small space, all at varying height. The carts hummed at different frequencies, clashing and grating against my ears. The air here smelled slightly metallic, which meant that the gliders themselves gave off some kind of discharge.

The porter lowered his glider to a space in front of white double doors. The doors were carved with the name of the hotel in black flowing script.

I stepped gingerly off the glider onto a platform in front of the doors. Inside, lights as bright as the afternoon sun in my garden back home greeted me, soothing my jangled nerves.

I turned, about to grab the bags, when the porter grinned at me. "Door to door service," he said and lugged them inside.

I followed.

The lobby of this hotel—if one could call it a lobby—was cavernous. It felt like an outdoor spa. The bright lights hid the ceiling—above me it looked like a gigantic sun had obliterated the sky. Plants that I did not recognize, most of them green, grew out of the floor, grouping around the furniture, and adding a minty scent to the already perfumed air.

The tension left my shoulders and I felt, for the first time since I had left Djapé, that I could relax. The porter led me to a black marble podium, one I would not have seen without him. It was hidden by the leafy plants, which parted as we approached.

The man set down my bags and extended a small silver disc. "Just a thumbprint," he said, "to verify it's you and your account will be charged."

I placed my thumb against the disc, which lit up. Then he nodded to me, pocketed the disc, and disappeared through the leaves.

I felt a slight pang at seeing him go. To assuage it, I turned to the podium. A lighted menu appeared above it. I checked myself in, then followed the written instructions. My bags were already moving on some kind of walkway toward my cabana.

I followed them.

My cabana resembled a small house. In fact, if I had not known I was on a station in space, I would have thought I was in some open but exotic domed colony somewhere.

The cabana had six rooms and two levels. Floor-to-ceiling windows covered the walls on the exterior side. The view constantly changed as the station slowly rotated.

I explored cautiously. The room that intrigued me the most was the dining area off the courtesy kitchen. A table sat on a clear floor, in a platform that extended out from the ring. When I sat on one of the chairs, I felt as if I were floating just outside the station.

I finally understood how someone lived on the Outpost without feeling trapped or claustrophobic. I had known that the place was huge—one of the largest of its type

anywhere in the sector—but I had thought that the darkness and the cramped quarters would make it feel like an underground cavern. Instead, I felt like I was in a magical place, one that held the promise of a great future.

For the first time in months, I was at peace.

I mapped my assault on the Outpost's musical venues as if I were planning a military campaign. In part, I knew that I would be an outsider, and I didn't want to call too much attention to myself. So my earliest visits would be at venues not too far from the guest ring.

But also, I didn't want to hear exceptionally exotic music. I was much more interested in music history, old Earth forms, truly human music with no alien influence whatsoever.

The first venue I chose was small and intimate, something called a blues club. The club itself was in a part of the Outpost called Saloon Central, a ring devoted mostly to clubs, bars, and restaurants that also dabbled in intoxicating substances.

I chose a table in the back away from the lights. A menu offered items I'd never heard of, from green chili to tamales to barbeque brisket—all, the menu claimed, authentic foods, but authentic to what I did not know. The air smelled tangy and sour, a scent that wasn't quite bad and wasn't quite good.

I ordered a beverage from a list I'd never heard of, something non-intoxicating called a C'cola, also considered "authentic," and a bowl of that day's special steak-and-potato soup.

Then I settled back and waited for the entertainment to begin.

The musicians did not file on stage as I had expected. Nor were they wearing matching clothing. In fact, they looked as though they were wearing their normal everyday dress. They carried instruments I had not seen before.

Slowly lights came up on the stage, revealing what I believed to be a percussion set—drums, was it called?—and some sort of keyboard instrument. I recognized two guitars and some kind of woodwind—a saxophone?—as well as a bass. Brass players—trumpeters?—sat near the percussionist in the back.

A rotund man sat on a stool in the center, one leg extended, the other supporting one of the guitars in the curve of its belly. The bass player sat on the right.

The remaining players sat near the side, holding their instruments down, all except the lone woman, who stood beside the rotund man in the center.

They crowded around their instruments, chatting so softly I couldn't hear them. Then the rotund man in the middle picked seven notes on his guitar.

They were almost a command to play music.

The others seemed to heed that command. The bass player plucked a long note. The keyboardist added a rolling chord, and the percussionist tapped one of the flatter instruments in the same rhythm the rotund man had played. With the other hand, the percussionist played one-and-a-two-and-a-three, which then got picked up by the brass, almost as if they were answering the initial line.

It seemed disorganized. The music was loud. I could feel each instrument in my sternum, the bass line in particular so forceful that it seemed to propel my heart to a new rhythm.

Each time the rotund man played his signature line, he changed it. The changes made me uneasy, and once I caught myself looking to see how the Pané were reacting.

Only there weren't any Pané in the room.

Just humans of all sizes, most of them nodding their heads to the one-and-a-two beat carved (and kept) by the percussionist. Then the rotund man changed octaves, playing the same seven notes, only varying the motif, as if he were composing the song on the spot. When he reached the end of that variation, all the pieces came to-

gether: the original motif, the answer, and the percussion into one dramatic note, followed by a prolonged rest.

At that moment, the woman whirled toward the audience as if she suddenly realized we were there. She sang to us as if she were talking to us. Only she made the words fit that original motif. Her singing was low, in the same register as the rotund man's strings, and repeated in the same rhythm.

At the moment she hit the end of the sentence, the instruments joined her, just the same way they had joined the rotund man when he started the song.

She was swaying to the music. The entire ensemble swayed, as if they couldn't help themselves. I glanced at the audience. They were swaying too.

I was the only one who wasn't moving, and it took me a moment to realize the strain that was causing me. I literally had to hold myself in place, each muscle tense, so that I wouldn't move.

Movement caused the vocal chords to slip, the breath to fail, the wrong muscle to tighten at the wrong moment. If a performer moved, he ran the risk of making a fatal error. Of course, in Tygher City, I had made a fatal error without moving anything except my lungs, my diaphragm, my throat, and my mouth. So even that theory, the theory of passivity, had been wrong.

Now the musical conversation had three parts: The woman, who sang her part as if she were making it up on the spot, the rotund man who continued his variations, and the rest of the musicians who either built a bed beneath her phrases or an answer to his.

I looked around again, afraid that someone would stop the music because of its myriad flaws, but no one did. Everyone was staring at the stage, bobbing their heads or tapping their fingers. Behind me, someone yelled, "Sing it, sister!" and the woman didn't stop, she didn't chastise him, she didn't even seem to notice.

I turned and looked. The man at the door, the one who had taken my credits, didn't do anything, and neither did the servers.

Apparently, it was all right to yell in this place. Just like it was all right to move even when you were on stage.

They got to the end of her lyrics, following a similar, but not the same motif that the rotund man had set up with his strings. She created her own variations, and explored them with her voice, which grew louder and more raspy as the words became more fraught.

Finally, she told us she was done, and the music did as it had before: all the instruments came together in a single note, punctuated by a prolonged rest.

Then the other man—the one who had been talking with the woman—stepped forward and actually spoke to us, as if the rest of the musicians weren't there at all. What he was saying responded directly to her lyrics. He was answering her, like the musical phrases answered each other.

The complexity made my head hurt. The music had only gone on for a few minutes, but it felt as if time had slowed down. Each phrase took on import, each beat seemed to reveal something new to me.

This wasn't music, not as I had heard music. This was something other, something visceral, something real.

The music came to that climactic pause again, and as it did, he and the woman turned to each other, mixing their lyrics together in a conversation—his words mimicking the background instruments' one-and-a-two rhythm, hers on that seven-note motif, so the entire opening of the piece, which had seemed so impromptu and random to me, suddenly had purpose.

They had planned this, maybe even practiced each section, yet somehow retained a spontaneity that put me on edge, frightening me with its sheer audacity.



Only no one else seemed to think it audacious. They all seemed to expect this—the melody, the response, the not-quite-musical singing, the raspiness, and the increasing violence of the music, as the man and woman played at anger with each other.

I knew they were playing, yet as the music grew louder and louder, that anger seemed real. It was there in the strings, in the power of the keyboard, in the bass line, in the harder and harder rhythm of the percussion player.

I shifted my chair backward, leaning against the wall, unable to go any farther. Never had music itself made me so uncomfortable—not the way it was performed, not the errors (of which there were dozens)—but the actual power of the notes, the force of the rhythm, the way that each sound built on every other sound, creating so much emotional power that I became overwhelmed.

Finally, the song ended. The sound reverberated throughout the room, and slowly faded. I let out the breath I hadn't realized I was holding, my heart racing.

They started another song—this one with three hard beats from the percussionist—and then the entire group of musicians weighed in.

I couldn't handle more music. My heart already felt like it was going to explode. I'd felt more violent emotions in that six-minute song than I had felt in months—maybe since I saw Gibson with his new protégé. Or maybe even before that.

I pressed my thumb against the payment screen, then staggered out, stepping into the wide corridor. It seemed too bright after being in that club. People strolled past, some arm in arm, others having discussions. Tables filled with diners sat outside a few of the restaurants.

No one looked at me oddly. Apparently a man staggering out of the blues club wasn't unusual. I leaned against a nearby pillar and tried to catch my breath.

My heart wouldn't slow. My entire stomach churned.

I had had no idea that music had such intrinsic power. I had known that it was different, just from the recordings. But I had heard that difference in an intellectual way—with a fascination that different musical traditions could have such unbelievably different rules. I had never thought of music as an emotional pursuit—something that could control not only how I felt, but how I breathed.

Faintly, from inside the club, I could hear the wail of the rotund man's guitar, the rasp of the woman's voice. I stayed against the column, a safe distance away.

How had I missed this? I had devoted my life to music. And now it seemed as if I had only known a small part of it.

When I finally caught my breath, I wandered back to my cabana, and climbed inside that floating dining room.

I sat there without the lights on, staring at the blackness beyond—a blackness that wasn't entirely dark, because of the light from stars I couldn't identify. I sat in silence.

Only there was no silence.

Because inside my mind, I kept hearing that seven note motif.

Finally I tried it myself. It wasn't as easy as it sounded. My notes were pure and somehow wrong. I sang the line again, and heard how inappropriate my voice was. The woman's voice had been lower than mine. My voice was high, as high as the guitar on its fourth octave.

So I warbled the motif, like the guitar had done, and heard something in my own voice that hadn't been there before:

A wail. Almost a moan.

It caught me, and pleased me, and frightened me, all at the same time. Ah, yes, the Pané had been right: other music corrupted. Other music changed.

I smiled softly to myself and sang the seven notes over and over again, each time making them different. Each time, making them mine.

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Of course I went back: I couldn't help myself. Night after night, I listened to the same group of people playing different songs in different combinations of instruments.

At first, I couldn't stay very long. I sat rigidly and fled when the panic got too great. But slowly, I found myself relaxing. The toes of my right foot started tapping, only to stop when I noticed, or my head bobbed ever so slightly, just like everyone else's in the audience.

Gradually, over the space of a week, I managed to stay for seven songs. When they ended, the group left the stage, although their instruments remained. The audience remained as well, which I thought odd. The other patrons ordered more drinks, talked among themselves, even talked with the musicians—which shocked me. On Djapé, we musicians could not speak to the Pané. It was expressly forbidden unless the Pané spoke to us first.

I ordered another C'cola (those things were addicting) and watched the interactions. After about twenty minutes, the musicians meandered toward the stage, always led by the rotund man. When he sat on his stool, one knee supported his instrument—which I now knew as an electric guitar. The music dictionary I consulted called it “an outmoded instrument that uses an amplifier [which, in original instruments, used dangerous electric current] to make the vibrations of the strings louder or to alter them altogether).”

I had looked up the blues as well. The definition told me why I had felt some unease. Central to the music was something called “blue notes,” notes that fell somewhere between natural and flat on the third, fifth, and seventh degrees of a C Major scale. Those blue notes had the effect of holding the listener between the major and minor modes, without quite achieving either of them, providing either a sense of unease or, in many cases, a feeling of loss, of incompleteness.

The blues, then, was composed of half-flatted notes—abominations to the Pané.

Which made sitting in this venue, dim and claustrophobic, feel like rebellion to me.

It was as I had that thought that the musicians started up again, this time with an up-tempo piece. The singer—if he could be called that—was the rotund man. He had the most nasal voice I had ever heard. He seemed to sing from his throat instead of his diaphragm. And yet his vocals had power.

He sang three verses, then repeated the melody on his guitar, creating his own arpeggio in the middle of it all. The usual male singer had joined the trumpet player in the back, playing a smaller version of the same instrument, with a higher pitch and a brighter tone.

The various sounds these people could make with their instruments, the way that they answered each other and yet made everything seem casual amazed me. This time, this song, caught me, and I couldn't stop my toes from tapping or myself from swaying. I kept breathing too, which I hadn't in some of the earlier songs.

I relaxed into it, feeling, for the first time, like part of the audience. Before that, I had felt like an observer, an alien myself, someone who couldn't quite understand the experience everyone else was having.

I still wasn't sure I understood it, but I appreciated it—and with this song, I realized it had become part of me, so deep a part that I couldn't control my own physical response to it. But I could finally move. I didn't have to be rigid any longer.

And that, more than anything, seemed like a victory to me.

After that night, I managed to stay for the entire show. I got used to the cuisine, falling in love with the brisket and the steak-and-potato soup. I nodded to the doorman as I came in, and after a week, the waitress no longer had to give me a menu. Instead, she asked me which of my favorites I preferred, and brought me C'colas whenever my glass was empty.

The music had become an obsession for me. I'd been coming long enough to hear the musicians play some of the same songs over and over again. But startlingly, terrifyingly, they never played the songs in quite the same way.

The first time they changed a motif or played the electric guitar in place of the saxophone, I felt frightened. Had I, for the first time in my life, misremembered a piece of music? But later that same evening, as they played yet another song differently, I realized they had no set track. Unlike the music we performed for the Pané, there was more than one way to play these songs.

And that seemed like such a revelation to me that I finally felt I needed to consult with someone. Someone who knew what they were doing. I wanted to talk to the round man.

I approached him after what he called a "set." He was always the first to climb onto the stage and the last to leave. After the first set of that evening's entertainment, he sat alone on his stool. He had unhooked his guitar from its strange amplifier, and he was plucking at the strings.

As I got closer, I could hear them, faint and precise.

He was tuning the guitar.

"Excuse me," I said. "May I ask you a question?"

He looked at me. Sweat beaded his forehead and lined the circles underneath his eyes. Up close, I saw that his shirt was drenched as well.

It was hot on the stage. The heat from the small bar seemed to gather here. The amplifier, which I stood beside, seemed to give off some heat of its own.

"Sure," he said, his fingers flat against the strings on the guitar's neck. He no longer picked at it. "What do you need to know?"

I wasn't sure how to ask the question. I felt awkward and young, something I hadn't felt around music in a very, very long time.

"You never play songs in the same way," I said.

He waited.

"Isn't that—is that—isn't that. . .?" I didn't know how to finish the question. It kept getting jumbled in my mind between two separate thoughts: *Isn't that wrong? Is that disrespectful?*

Finally, instead of choosing between those thoughts, I blurted, "Doesn't music have rules here?"

"Rules," he repeated. He studied me for a moment. "Of course music has rules. It's all about rules."

"But you don't follow any of them," I said.

His eyes narrowed. He leaned back, his head tilting. It was as if he saw me for the very first time.

"Should you even be here?" he asked.

I flushed and lowered my head. I didn't want him to think I had deliberately stepped out of my place—whatever that place was.

"I don't know," I said. "If there are rules about who can be in this club, no one told me. If I'm supposed to leave—"

"No," he said. "That's not what I mean. You're one of those unfortunates, right? From Djapé?"

I raised my head. He was staring at me as if I were as alien to him as his music was to me.

"Unfortunates?" I repeated.

"One of those—what're you called?—castrati? Castrato? You . . . dress like one." He wasn't originally going to say "dress." He was going to say "sound" or "speak." Others had said the same thing to me on the Outpost.

I had learned not to correct their ignorance, and to suffer their questions with as much grace as I could muster.

"I was raised on Djapé," I said cautiously.

"Which means you're one of their musicians, right? And from what I understand, they don't want you off the planet, let alone in a place like this, listening to us."

His words weren't harsh. They had a compassion and an interest that no one had shown me before.

"They no longer care what I do," I said.

"You got yourself fired?" His eyebrows went up. "I didn't know that was possible."

"No, I wasn't fired." My flush deepened. "I swallowed a note."

"You what?" He was leaning forward now. "What does that mean?"

"It means that I am no longer a trustworthy soloist, so my singing career is over." I spoke with a dispassion that surprised me. "I could have taught, but I chose instead to travel. I've never seen any place other than Djapé."

He frowned. "And you think this is where you should be?"

My heart was pounding as if his percussionist had gone back to work. "I've never heard music like this before. I had planned to go to other clubs, different venues. But I came here first. I've never heard anything like this. Not even on the old recordings. Your music is . . . evocative."

Words were so inadequate.

"And different," I said. "And technically, it shouldn't be. Technically, it's wrong."

"Wrong," he repeated.

My breath caught. Had I insulted him? I hadn't meant to.

"Each time you play," I said, "the songs are different. Are you making a statement by refusing to play the correct version of the song? Is it a rebellion?"

"The correct version of the song." He kept repeating my phrases as if we weren't speaking the same language, as if he had to hear the words in his own voice before he understood them. "What do you mean, the correct version of the song?"

"The composer's version," I said. "Surely, someone wrote it down or recorded it, showing how it should be played."

He blinked at me. "Don't you improvise on Djapé?"

"Improvise?" It was my turn to parrot him. I shook my head. "Humans live under constraints on Djapé. Our lives are prescribed. We are not to deviate from any standard procedure. So, I suppose the answer is no, we do not improvise."

His eyes twinkled, as if my response amused him. "I meant musically," he said. "I was wondering if anyone taught you improvisation. But after what you just said, I doubt it."

"Improvisation is a musical term?" I asked.

He nodded.

"You're making fun of me now," I said. "Music can't be improvised. It is all about precision and accuracy."

He rested an arm over the front of his guitar. "What would you have to be accurate about?"

"Following the composer's wishes," I said. "Making certain each note is hit precisely and held for the exact moment specified in the score."

"Seriously?" he asked.

"Yes," I said. "That's why I am asking you about your styles. Do the composers of your songs have more than one preferred text? Or are you making some kind of protest with your music? Is this an aspect of the blues that is accepted like half-flatted notes?"

"This—you mean improvisation?" he asked.

I shook my head. "Playing each song in a different manner than you played it the time before."

"We improvise," he said. "We let the music move us and we do what we feel when we feel it."

I couldn't wrap my brain around the concept. I was shaking my head as we spoke.

"Look," he said, "music follows rules. You were talking about them a minute ago. Haven't you taken theory?"

"I have sung," I said. "I haven't studied. There are theories to music?"

"Hundreds of them, just among humans alone, depending on the culture. We work out of a European Western tradition, based in ancient Earth texts. Blues evolved about a thousand years after the first known instances of repeated Western music. I would think you would be familiar with it. You're part of that tradition."

"I am?" I asked.

"Castrati," he said, "were extremely popular in opera—you know opera, right?"

I shook my head.

He raised his eyebrows. "I thought they were having you sing opera on Djapé."

"No," I said. "We sing music specially written for and approved by the Pané."

"Man," he said, then grinned. "See? Even I have something to learn about music."

"You were saying something about opera and the musical tradition," I said.

"I was talking about castrati," he said. "They were really popular in the two hundred years before anyone ever thought of the blues. The castrati sang women's parts in Italian opera, but that probably doesn't mean anything to you since you don't know what opera is."

He shook his head in clear astonishment.

"Damn, I always thought you were following the operatic tradition. I thought you guys were singing the women's parts."

"Women do not sing for the Pané," I said. "It is forbidden. They are allowed to sing for humans in saloons, but only in the all-human areas."

"Weird," he said. "Fascinating, but weird."

Some of the other musicians had come back onto the stage.

"Look," he said. "I can't teach you anything about music or music theory or music history in a twenty-minute break. But we can continue the discussion at the conservatory tomorrow. I teach a three PM class in American folk songs, spirituals, and the blues. You could sit in if you want."

"I would like that," I said.

He extended his hand. I had seen this before on the Outpost. It was a sign of greeting and trust. I took his hand in mine. His skin was rough, as if it were made of a different substance than mine. His fingertips actually scraped my skin.

"I'm Jackson Scopes," he said. "Come find me tomorrow."

"I will," I said after I introduced myself. "And thank you."

I went back to my seat, thinking I wouldn't be able to concentrate on the music. But the rotund man—Jackson—started to play an eight-note combination on his electric guitar. Trumpets soared over it, added sixteenth notes and a glissando that sent shivers down my back. Then the percussionist joined in, and the woman started to sing.

I was lost, unease forgotten. The music swept me away, and I spent the rest of the evening in my chair, tapping my toes and reminding myself to breathe.

The conservatory had its own ring. It was a smaller ring that encircled a section of the large higher education ring. Apparently, the conservatory had once been part of the higher education ring, like the two colleges and the university, but the conservatory had become so famous and attracted so many students that it needed additional space.

I hired a driver to take me to the conservatory, and I was glad that I did. As his two-person taxi glided through the corridors of the Outpost, he showed me the higher education ring, the conservatory, and the connectors on a glowing map that most-

ly covered one window. He was trying to give me instruction so that in the future, I could find the area myself, but all he managed to do was confuse me.

Still, I thanked him as he let me off in front of the American Wing of the Old Earth Campus on the Conservatory. Jackson's classroom wasn't far from the main doors. It was bigger than I had expected, like a concert hall only with the stage at the bottom of the room, so that everyone looked down on the professor.

The students sat close to the front, so I remained in the back. Jackson stood in the very center of that lowered stage. Diagrams floated around him. All of them were music notations on a familiar five-line staff.

As Jackson touched each staff, music surrounded us. The notes on the staff moved as the music moved, showing us the notation that signified what the music was doing.

We were listening to a five-note melody, played in different lengths and different rhythms. Jackson got rid of the lyrics so that we could concentrate on the sound. The sound made me as uncomfortable as the blues had when I had first heard it.

Even though the music seemed simple, with its variations on the same five notes, the sound produced was not. The song was something he called a spiritual, a father of the blues.

While I followed the moving notes, stunned at the variations rhythm could bring to the same piece of music, I didn't understand half of what he told us.

I didn't mind. I felt exhilarated as the class ended—not because of all I failed to understand, but because of what little I did.

Music had more depth and history than I had ever expected. What I had learned on Djapé was a small, narrow subset, one that had more to do with Pané tastes than human tastes.

As the class ended, I silently promised myself I would ask Jackson how I could enroll in the conservatory. I wanted to begin all over again, learn music anew.

The music ended, the notations disappeared, and slowly the students filed out. I remained in my seat. Jackson finished compiling his materials up front, placing the small discs in his pocket, and then climbed the stairs to me.

"What did you think?" he asked.

"I am stunned at all that I do not know," I said.

"And you want to learn, right?"

"Yes," I said.

He nodded. "Getting into the conservatory is hard—and expensive."

"Money is not a problem for me," I said.

"Finding space in a class, especially since you've already had a career, might be difficult. But I know who you can talk to."

He signaled me to get up.

"Come with me," he said. "I want to introduce you to the chief administrator of the Old Earth Wing."

"I assume from his title there are other wings?"

Jackson nodded as he led me out of the classroom. "The conservatory specializes in music from a variety of places. Mostly we focus on human forms, but there is a Pané wing, another wing for the Escarbemantes, and a few others. I don't listen to much alien music. I barely listen to human music of the post-colonial era. Mostly I listen to Old Earth forms."

As we passed door after door, I heard snatches of music. Some of it grand, with dozens of instruments, and some of it simple. A baritone sang arpeggios in one of the rooms.

We climbed four stairs to a floor that reminded me of my cabana. Floor-to-ceiling windows showed a truncated view. I could see the vistas of nearby space, but they were eclipsed by a walkway and a bit of the Higher Education Ring.



Couches covered the floor, with tables alongside. Scores floated by, tempting me to touch them so that I could hear the music they so clearly depicted.

"You can listen to anything you want," Jackson said, "so long as you use one of the private earcubes. We don't want you to disturb other passers-by."

The cubes sat on a nearby table. They were tiny, about an eighth the size of my smallest fingernail. I looked longingly at them.

"Later," he said, "I'll get you permission to use one of the conservatory's music libraries."

"Thank you," I said. "You're being quite kind."

"Not really," he said. "You've intrigued me with your questions. I'm fascinated by the way you think."

He leaned into a door on the wall opposite the windows and called to someone named Felix.

A man came out. He was tall, with a narrow nose and wide eyes. His lips narrowed when he saw me.

"This is the singer I told you about from Djapé," Jackson said. "He was quite well known—"

"You're early," Felix said to me as if I had done something wrong.

My face warmed. "I'm sorry. I didn't realize we had an appointment."

Jackson looked at Felix in confusion. Felix was frowning at me.

"I told your people we'd contact you when we were ready," Felix said. "We're not ready. We only have two. Normally we don't contact you until there are five or more."

"I'm sorry," I said again. "You must have me confused with someone else."

"You're from Djapé," Felix said. "You're here for the sopranos?"

My breath caught. "Boys?"

"What else?" he asked. "We should get another shipload in a month or so, and I'm told there are more on that."

"More sopranos?" I asked, my mouth dry.

Jackson was looking back and forth at us as if he didn't know what was going on. I didn't exactly either, but I had an inkling.

"We don't know if there are sopranos," Felix said. "But the incoming ship has an orphan wing. There are possibles. I thought you were going to wait until we could screen them."

Jackson took a step back from me. "I thought you didn't know anyone here."

"I don't," I said.

"Then what's this?" Jackson asked.

"I'm not sure." I folded my hands in front of my robe and leaned toward Felix. "You think I'm here to take boys back to Djapé?"

"Why else would you come?" Felix said.

I swallowed. "I came to the Outpost because of your music."

"I caught him listening to blues, Felix," Jackson said. "No true castrato from Pané would contaminate himself with human music."

"Then why is he here?" Felix asked.

I bowed, as I had been taught to do when I was most offended. I rose slowly, and said, "I am a windchime. I performed in the highest halls of Djapé, but my voice has failed me. I am a true castrato, as you say, but I am not here to bring others to Djapé. I am here to learn."

Felix blinked at me as if he couldn't quite believe what he was hearing. "Learn what?"

I folded my hands in front of my robe. "The forbidden music."

I said that last in a whisper. It was the first time I had admitted it to myself.

"You were offering him *kids*?" Jackson asked. "What the hell is that?"

Felix gave him a sideways glance. It looked furtive to me. "We have an agreement with the human musical colony on Djapé. If we encounter pure boy sopranos, we notify them. The Pané's tastes are so particular that they go through singers as if they were made of crystal. One bad shake and they've shattered."

The description was so accurate that I shuddered. It was one of the reasons we were called windchimes. A single crack, tiny and nearly invisible, could ruin a windchime's tone forever.

"You think it right to send a child into that mess?" Jackson asked.

"Why not? It's better than hiring them out to freighters at thirteen. That's what happens to most of the kids who come through here." Felix looked at me. "You lived a luxurious life, right? You have money. You're well off."

"I have money," I said.

"So you came for what?" Felix asked. "Reconstruction and reeducation?"

"Reconstruction is possible?" I asked.

"Sure," Felix said. "That's what most of the has-beens do when they get here. They get repaired and they go on to live normal lives."

"Without their voice," I said.

"Usually, they end up with a very musical voice," Felix said. "It is just a male voice. An adult male voice."

"Without the purity," I said.

"Humans rarely care about purity of tone," Felix said. "We outgrew that before we left Earth's solar system."

"It's Pané affectation," Jackson said, as if he were trying to convince me.

My breath caught. I thought of myself, singing those blue notes all those weeks ago, how odd my voice sounded. Yet how rich.

Both men were watching me. "You didn't come here for that either, did you?" Felix said.

I shook my head. "I came to see if I could enroll in the conservatory."

"Why?" Felix asked. "You already know Pané music."

"Jackson tells me there is an entire musical history I do not know. I would like to learn it."

Felix studied me for a moment. "You're not here for the boys?" he asked once again.

"No," I said. "Although I would like to meet them."

"Why?" Felix sounded wary.

"I am curious," I said.

"I can't believe this," Jackson said. "You sell children to the Pané?"

Felix straightened his back. "You know how the Children's Ring works. Don't sound so shocked."

"We don't usually sell children to aliens who'll disfigure them," Jackson said.

It was as if I was not in the room.

"We do not sell," Felix said.

"Maybe not outright," Jackson said, "but don't tell me there's no quid pro quo."

Felix shifted from foot to foot. "The Pané have generously agreed to fund the education of the other children. It's a small price to pay for the artistic richness we have given them."

"Artistic richness?" Jackson asked. "Those kids don't get a choice."

"It is what it is," Felix said. "They don't get a choice about being orphaned, either."

I felt dizzy. I had no memories of my life before Djapé, although Gibson told me that I had come from another community and my parents were dead.

*I am your family now*, he had said to me in my earliest memory.

Only he wasn't family. He hadn't ever been family, only a man hoping to get rich off my talent.

"Have you always done it this way?" I asked Felix.

"I inherited the program," Felix said, with a glare at Jackson. "I wasn't sure I liked it at first either, but I toured the facilities on Djapé. Those kids live in luxury."

Jackson shook his head. He looked like he was about to speak.

"How long has this system been in place?" I asked.

"A century or more," Felix said. "I can look it up for you."

"So I came through here?"

Both men looked at me as if they suddenly realized that their discussion existed in more than theory.

"All human musicians get approved at the Outpost," Felix said.

"Just like the other merchandise." Jackson's face was red, but not with embarrassment. With anger.

"I've heard no complaints," Felix said.

"That doesn't make it right," Jackson said.

"Ask your friend," Felix said. "Are you dissatisfied with your life?"

I did not know how to answer that question. My life was what it was. I couldn't imagine it any other way.

But then, I had little experience of other lives. What I knew about the universe, I had learned in the small human enclaves on Djapé.

"He's here, isn't he?" Jackson said. "Isn't that proof enough of dissatisfaction?"

"He's here because he did something to upset the Pané," Felix said.

"That's true," I said.

Jackson frowned. "Swallowing a note was enough to torpedo an entire career?"

"The Pané expect perfection," Felix said as if I weren't there. "That humans can achieve it, even for a short period of time, is nothing short of miraculous."

The warmth in my face increased. I didn't want to think about the Pané. But I did want to understand where I had come from.

"Let me see the boys," I said.

"So you *are* here to take them back," Felix said.

"No," I said. "I had never thought of my life before Djapé. I would simply like to see what it had been like."

"Then you should see all of them," Jackson said.

Felix frowned. I thought he was going to say no, but he surprised me.

"Jackson is right," Felix said. "You should see all of them. Even the ones who aren't going to leave the Outpost."

My heart did a small flip, like it did when Jackson's musicians played a particularly interesting line of music.

"I would like that," I said. "I would like it very much."

They called it the Children's Ring, but Felix told me that wasn't accurate. Not all children on the Outpost lived here, only the ones without family.

It was still a dangerous sector. People died all the time, leaving their children untended. Many children died, abandoned and alone.

Even more came to the Outpost, searching for some way to survive.

Eventually, the Outpost set up an area for them, complete with teachers and caretakers. If they were old enough, the children had to agree to live by the Outpost's rules—education and care in return for years of service wherever the Outpost deemed appropriate. If the children weren't old enough to make a decision for themselves, they were offered for limited adoption. The limited adoption period lasted no more than two months. If no one took the children, they were then placed in the Children's Ring and expected to follow the same rules as all the others.

"Limited adoption?" I asked as we settled into one of the Conservatory's glide ve-

hicles. Felix handled the controls. His position gave him all kinds of privileges within the Conservatory and parts of the Outpost. "What exactly does that mean?"

"The child doesn't have to become part of any family," Felix said. "But the person who sponsors the adoption guarantees the child's education and livelihood. Most of the children who go to Djapé do so under terms of a limited adoption."

"So I had one," I said.

"Most likely," Felix said. "This plan has been in place for decades."

I swallowed hard. My throat constricted. Still, I managed to ask, "Could I trace mine?"

"If you're still using the name you had when you arrived on the Outpost," Felix said. "And the only way to know that is to look."

Jackson sat in the back of the glide car. He wasn't watching either of us. Instead, he watched the door fronts pass us by. We had gone by several musical departments, all part of the Conservatory, and all of them leading into areas as large as the Old Earth Music Department.

The glide cart left the Conservatory through one of the bridges that led to the Higher Education Ring. We went through two other bridges between rings, each more crowded and cramped than the last, until we ended up in the Children's Ring.

It had straight walls and no apparent windows into the space beyond. The walls were decorated with multicolored rectangles. It took me a while to realize that those rectangles were doors.

Felix glided the cart past schools, religious buildings, and storefronts, finally stopping at a wide building with double doors marked *Auditorium*.

"This is the induction center," he said. "Children spend their first week or so here, as they learn the rules, figure out where they fit, and get tested."

My shoulders were rigid. My hands, clasped over my stomach, were pressed so tightly together that my fingers ached.

"Tested for what?" I asked.

"Their various aptitudes," Felix said.

"To find out if they're musical," I said.

"Musical, mathematical, or have a facility for languages," Felix glided the cart into a pole that had locks along the edges. "As well as hundreds of other skills and talents."

"So they all have a place," I said, feeling more relieved than I expected.

"Of course not," Jackson said. "Some kids are too young to have skills. Others are too traumatized to even try."

He sounded bitter. He was clearly familiar with this place. I shifted on my seat so that I could see him.

"What happens to those children?" I asked.

"They're the ones who usually get shipped off by freighter at thirteen," Jackson said. "If they survive that long."

"Survive?" I asked. "Children die here?"

"It's not health," Jackson said. "It's cooperation. You have to work within the machine. If you don't, then you get moved."

"Moved where?" I asked.

"There is an area for troubled children," Felix said. He let himself out of the cart onto one of the glide platforms. He hit the button, sending himself down.

I felt disoriented. Felix hadn't wanted to discuss the troubled children. Jackson wasn't looking at me either.

"They die in the area for troubled children?" I asked.

Jackson shrugged one shoulder. "They don't thrive."

"How do you know this?" I asked.

He turned toward me. His expression was bleak. "You and I both came through

this place. You received a limited adoption and lost body parts. I was trouble. I worked a freighter."

"But you have a teaching position now," I said. "You play music every night."

"Where do you think I learned about the blues?"

"They play blues on freighters?" I asked.

Jackson smiled faintly, almost contemptuously, and shook his head. "Did you like living on Djapé?"

My garden rose in my mind. And the music, playing softly in my study. The forbidden music. The way my back tensed before I went on stage. The feeling of relief and terror that happened as my voice cracked.

"I don't know," I said.

"I hated the freighter," he said. "I hated what Felix calls the Trouble Area. You didn't hate Djapé."

"Hate is a strong word," I said.

"And I've noticed that you don't use strong words." Jackson shrugged. "Go visit. See what you think."

My heart was pounding.

"How do I get down?" I asked.

"Touch the pole," Jackson said. "Your glide platform will appear next to the door."

I had to lean forward to touch the pole. It vibrated slightly under my fingertips. Within seconds, the platform appeared beside the car, a square bit of flooring that looked unstable to me. Still, I let myself out, balancing myself with my hands on the pole and the glide car.

"Are you coming?" I asked Jackson.

His face was gray. He looked vaguely ill. "No."

I studied him for a moment, but he no longer met my gaze. Instead, he looked at the neighborhood as if he had never seen it before.

I left him. The platform took me down slowly. It felt as rickety as it looked, as if if I moved wrong, I would fall. I held myself rigid. The platform landed, and I staggered slightly to the left.

Felix was waiting beside the double doors.

"Did Jackson try to talk you out of coming?" he asked.

"No," I said. "But he's not going to join us."

Felix gave me a sideways, somewhat distracted grin. "You know he grew up here."

"He told me," I said. "I didn't expect it."

"You should have. I think a good 50 percent of the permanent workforce came through the Children's Ring."

He pulled the doors opened, stepping inside. The interior was dark compared with the main thoroughfare we'd traveled along.

"Did you?" I asked as I followed him into the dimness.

"No," he said. "I'm one of the lucky ones. I was hired for my expertise."

"With children?" I asked.

This time he did look at me in surprise. "In Ancient Music, particularly Earth forms."

"I'm surprised the Outpost found that a valuable skill."

"It wasn't the Outpost," he said. "It was the Conservatory. They needed someone with a broad range of knowledge to handle the Old Earth Department. All human music was born on Earth. Those forms are the most important."

"All human music," I said slowly. "Even what we sang on Djapé?"

"Especially what you sang there," he said. "The diatonic scale—the eight whole notes—comes from Ancient Greece. The hexachords that you also sang were developed in Europe in what was called the Middle Ages, and arpeggios, especially those sung in descending order, which were first developed in a period called the Renaissance."

"But I was told that the Pané had unique musical tastes," I said.

"Most humans do not listen to pure notes or broken chords and consider them entertainment. To humans, they are part of a great whole, a symphony or a song. To the Pané, they are the entire performance."

We had gone deep into the building. It had no windows. Only doorways marked with numbers running alongside the hallway. Eventually the hallway opened up, revealing another set of double doors.

"I contacted the headmistress here," he said. "The boys are waiting for you."

He made it sound like I was still going to chose them. My stomach clenched.

"They don't think I'm going to adopt them or anything, do they?" I asked.

He shook his head. "They only know that you want an audition. That is what you want, isn't it?"

I wasn't sure what I wanted. "Is that what you do when someone comes from Djapé?"

"Scales and arpeggios only," he said. "Would you like to hear that?"

It was what I understood. But I didn't want to set up the wrong expectations.

"Whatever they have prepared is fine," I said.

He made a small grunt, as if I had disappointed him, and then we stepped through the doors.

I had expected an auditorium—something with a stage and chairs. While this room was large, it was just an empty space. The floor did slope downward slightly, but that seemed to be more of a design flaw than anything else.

A woman stood to one side and when she saw us, she waved a hand. A group of boys filed in. They ranged in age from about ten to four or five. At the end of the group, four women brought in very little children. The women held their hands as the boys half-walked, half-tumbled forward. Some were so young that they hadn't mastered walking very well yet. Others had obviously been raised in zero-g and weren't used to walking in gravity.

"Only boys?" I asked.

Felix gave me a withering look. "No other aliens care about our music. And the Pané only want male sopranos."

I almost protested again that I was not here for the Pané, but I did not. He had thought I was interested only in the children who might go to Djapé—and maybe I was.

"We'll start with the little ones," Felix said. "Let's just go one by one."

Each little boy paraded forward. At the urging of the woman who had led him in, he would sing a diatonic scale. All the little ones had beautiful voices, but only one sang with such purity that my hair stood on end.

He was tiny, with big brown eyes and hair cut so short that it stood straight up on top. He didn't seem to understand why anyone wanted him to sing, but all the woman had to do was name the note and he sang it with clarity and such accuracy that if I tested the note mechanically, I would have found him to hit the center of the pitch—no variation, not even a fraction of a fraction off.

"He's one of the two, isn't he?" I softly asked Felix. Felix nodded.

I walked up to the boy and crouched.

"Sing after me," I said, and proceeded to sing the C Major arpeggio that I had destroyed in Tygher City.

The boy sang with me—C-E-G-C-G-E-C—his notes so pure and fresh that shivers ran down my spine.

He didn't know what he was singing. He was just making sounds. Lovely sounds, but nothing more.

The older boys watched, rapt. The youngest boys squirmed, held fast by the women who had brought them in. Everyone was staring at me.



"Thank you," I said to the little one who sang for me.

He gave me a wide grin, and then ran back to his handler. He hugged her thigh.

I frowned as I saw that. He had made a connection here, whether he had known it or not. He would not be able to hug a woman like that on Djapé. Not without special permission.

Then I stood, and backed up.

"Let's hear the rest of you," I said.

The woman who had called them all in clapped her hands together. They looked toward her. Then she waved her hands in a fashion that seemed to give them direction.

One quarter of them started. They sang in perfect unison, singing the entire verse. Then they started over, and when they got to the end of the first line, another quarter of the group started at the beginning. When the second group got to the end of the first line, the third quarter chimed in. And when they reached their line, the final quarter joined.

I had never heard the song sung this way—and it became instantly clear that the song had been designed to be sung like this. The harmonies were lovely, the boys' voices strong.

And like a perfect chorus, no voice stuck out.

One of the oldest boys on the side closest to me sang with such complete joy that my eye went to him immediately. He smiled as the harmonies grew more intense and his body swayed as if he were listening to one of Jackson's performances in the blues club.

The boys finished and the chords echoed through the auditorium. Now I knew how the place had gotten its name. Its acoustics were perfect.

"Let's hear it again," I said, "but this time, with only one person from each group."

I didn't care who the first three were, but I wanted to hear that joyful boy. So I picked three others from the sections and him. He had been in the final group, so he would have a solo at the end, but he wouldn't start.

The boy who started wobbled his way through the opening line. He was clearly terrified, his throat closing and constricting the notes. He didn't lose pitch, but his tone was muddy.

The second child joined, then the third. The fourth—the boy I was interested in—tilted his head back and opened his mouth, blending perfectly. Again he sang with joy.

As each part dropped out, his became stronger. At the end, he sounded like the entire chorus all by himself.

And like that little boy who sang for me, this boy had a purity of tone that sent shivers down my spine.

"You're amazing," Felix said to me. "You found the other one."

It wasn't hard. I had grown up listening to voices like that. But I nodded.

"Thank you," I said to the boys. "Thank you all."

I thanked the women as well, and they nodded at me. Then the one who had directed the chorus asked Felix if they could leave. He looked at me.

I nodded, and the boys filed out.

"Satisfied?" he asked.

But I wasn't. I felt even more uncomfortable than I had expected—not because this performance raised memories. It didn't. But because of the children themselves.

I must have been as young as that first boy when I'd left the Outpost. I had no memory of a time before Djapé, and I had vague memories of imitation singing, much like I had the boy do for me. It was the way the youngest children learned to sing in the Pané style.

But the older boy bothered me. He had already learned music—this culture's music—and he loved it.

"You can't send that older child to Djapé," I said to Felix. "The Pané will destroy him."

Felix frowned at me. "You can't know that."

"I know it better than you," I said. "They'll teach perfection, not enjoyment. Each note is an exam, not a linked unit with any other note. He may spend years there, but he'll never be a top-level performer, and he will learn to hate his gift."

Felix glanced toward the door the boys had left through.

"So that's why you wanted to come," he said. "To prevent children from going to Djapé. I told you how entrenched this system is, how the Pané money helps the other children—"

"Yes," I said. "You told me, and I believe you. The youngest one is exactly what they want. He is a mimic. He makes sounds, pure sounds, not music. He is a human wind-chime, and they will love him."

Felix was still watching me warily. "I still hear hesitation in your voice."

I sighed. I was guessing at this last part. "He has affection for the woman who brought him here. You shouldn't break that up."

"Women can't contaminate the performers," Felix said.

"You could argue that she's already had an influence, and it can't be heard in his voice. Make her a deal-breaker."

He stared at me. "You guarantee that the Pané will like him?"

"Yes," I said. "I spent my entire life in that system. I know what they're looking for."

"You realize his happiness isn't an issue," Felix said.

"It seems that happiness isn't an issue for anyone here," I said, not telling him that I never thought of happiness either. "But if he has someone to care for him, he'll perform better, and maybe he'll survive longer than some of the others who come to Djapé."

Maybe he wouldn't have a horrible realization, as I had, that the person he thought cared about him only cared about his perfect voice.

"Why would he survive longer?" Felix asked.

"Fear," I said. "Voices shatter from the sheer terror of making a mistake. I was raised to be perfect or I would be rejected. Maybe if he has someone who cares for him as him, he will not be afraid of such rejection. His voice won't constrict. He'll perform from strength, not from terror."

Felix continued to stare at me, and then he shook his head. He grinned, just a little. "You want my job?"

"I know nothing about Old Earth," I said.

"Picking voices for the Pané," he said.

"No," I said before I could edit my response. "I want to study every form of music possible. I want to break the habits I learned on Djapé, not embrace them."

"So you're a lot more like that older kid. You love music," Felix said.

I thought of those stolen moments in my study, the revelations in the blues club, the odd sound to my own voice as I tried that seven-note opening.

"I was nothing like that boy," I said. "I was a windchime, just like the little one. But I stumbled on some recordings, and they changed me."

The recordings had frightened me too, but I wasn't going to tell Felix that. They had frightened me because they had contaminated me, and I had let it happen. I might even have let that vocal break happen, just to escape the repetition of performance, the nightly striving for perfection.

"If you sent the older boy to Djapé, you would change him in the wrong way. The younger one, he would have the good life you told Jackson about. And if the younger boy chooses something different when he gets older, then so be it. But you would be forcing the older child into a mold that doesn't suit him."

"One child, not two," Felix said, almost to himself. "They're not going to like this."

"One child who sings longer. One child who loves what he does. Usually you send two because one will break, right?"

He looked at me. His gaze was measuring. It was as if I had uncovered a secret even he didn't want to acknowledge.

"It's always been that way," he said. "You send two, one breaks. And no one has been able to predict the break."

"Because you have to know what life on Djapé is like, and you don't know that," I said.

"But you do."

Too well.

"Don't send the one who'll break," I said. "Send the woman instead."

"They hated women's voices," he said as if I didn't know.

"She's not going there to sing," I said. "She's going to make sure he does."

"By taking care of him," Felix said. He turned away from me, but not before I saw the relief on his face.

"Yes," I said.

"Are you telling me no one takes care of these children?"

"No, I'm not saying that." I looked at the door where the children had filed out. I had no idea what level of care they received here. I supposed I could ask Jackson.

"Then why send the woman?" Felix asked.

"The children get good care," I said, "but they—we—are commodities. And if we break, no one puts us back together."

"Is that what happened to you?" Felix asked.

"As an adult," I said. "But I know it happens to the young ones. I've seen it."

"What do they do with them?" Felix asked.

I frowned. I didn't exactly know. The ones I had seen got led offstage, never to perform again.

"They grow up to become support staff, I think," I said. "I don't exactly know."

Sadly, ironically, I had never thought about it before.

Felix walked to the front of the room. He was clearly thinking about what I'd said. He clasped his hands behind his back, paced as if he were retracing the boys' steps, and then walked back to me.

He nodded. "I can make this work. I know I can."

His mood seemed suddenly lighter. I let out a small breath of air I hadn't realized I had been holding.

Maybe this all disturbed me more than I wanted to admit. Such a big system, and these boys were only a small part of it. The entire Outpost had developed around the orphans. And if they had been farmed out throughout the decades, then they had an impact throughout the entire sector.

But Felix clearly wasn't thinking of that. He was thinking of our discussion. He clapped a hand on my back and led me out of the auditorium. As we walked down the hall, he said, "If I do this, you'll have to agree to listen to the future candidates."

It wasn't a question. It was a command. I bristled at commands.

"I already said I don't want your job," I said.

"I'm asking you to consult," he said. "In exchange for the right to study at the Conservatory."

I wanted to say no, but that might have been a reaction to his preemptory statement. I also wanted to study at the Conservatory. I wanted to study human musical traditions. I wanted to learn everything I could about the art I had just so recently discovered. I could do some of that simply by attending the bars, clubs, and concert halls on the Outpost. But the last week of listening to Jackson's performances had raised questions too complicated to answer in a single night's performance.

Still, I wanted to make my own decision—and not one based on Djapé or the Pané or sending boys to a life just like mine had been. “I want to think about it,” I said.

My silence must have told Felix about my ambivalence. He nodded. “Fair enough,” he said.

I spent the next three days thinking about Felix’s offer. Only I wasn’t thinking so much about the trade as I was about myself. I had never done a lot of self analysis. I was just stumbling onto it here, and it felt as uncomfortable as the music I had first heard in the blues club.

Windchimes did not feel emotion. Windchimes simply let air pass through their instrument, achieving a purity of sound that was in their very nature. Not because they had brought the emotion to the surface. Not because they had felt anything, except maybe a cold breeze.

The fear came because the instrument could become flawed. The chimes could crack, the wind could shatter a delicate part of the glass itself. And then nothing, not even the most careful repair, could remake the sound. Sound was notoriously fickle. Its perfection was short-lived.

Perhaps that was why blues had intrigued me so much. The blues did not seem to recognize perfection. The blues seemed to spurn it.

The older boy had felt emotion when he sang. The younger boy had not. He hadn’t even thought of music as anything other than sounds that traveled through his instrument, through his voice.

Perfection could be trained. It could be achieved by a blessed few. I had done so. That child might be able to as well.

Oddly, at least to me, I felt less conflicted about choosing the children than I did about my own motivation for doing so. When I had left Djapé, I’d hoped to leave permanently. I had kept my home there, yes, because I was afraid (that word again!) that I would not survive the universe outside of the one I had known.

But I could survive here, even if I did not join the Conservatory. I could spend the rest of my life here, listening to music, discovering new theories, and learning to use my voice in a new way.

I did not go to the blues club during those three days, but I did go back to the Children’s Ring. I asked for—and received—my records.

Apparently Gibson, who had taken me from the Outpost, had kept my name. I had been three, just like he said. One of ten survivors of a mid-space collision between a passenger ship and some kind of space debris. The pilots survived. A few of the crew had taken the children first to a secure area. By the time they were ready to get the parents, they’d realized that the back section of the ship had opened to the coldness of space.

All of the children had been brought to the Outpost, where the authorities had followed standard protocol: they had searched for the remaining family. Some of the children had grandparents and aunts and uncles. I had had no one, except the two people traveling with me. People who were listed only by their names, and the fact that they were traveling to the Outpost to look for work.

“Charity cases,” the woman who helped me with the records said. “Sometimes the Outpost does that. It funds a ship of job seekers. It’s hard to get good workers out here, and even harder to keep them.”

“So I would have ended up on the Outpost no matter what,” I said.

She nodded. “And probably not have been tested for music. You would have lived with your parents and most likely had minimal education. You would have ended up as they did.”

“Dead?” I asked.

She laughed. "No," she said. "Whatever jobs they found themselves in were the jobs you would have been considered for."

"Work is hereditary here?" I asked.

She shook her head. "But families tend to follow the same paths. The new jobs are filled by the children from the Ring—the talented children of the Ring, of course."

Her comments sounded self-serving to me, so I investigated them, and found, indeed, that employment studies of the Outpost had shown the most driven employees were not members of the families who lived here, but the children who had been orphaned. They had learned competition, the value of hard work, and how to maximize their own skill set.

Which was what I was now trying to do. I had a beautiful voice—albeit unconventional for the Outpost—and a growing love of all types of music. A curiosity that had gotten me in trouble on Djapé and might serve me well here. A curiosity that seemed to grow the more I learned.

After the three days, I returned to Felix and accepted his offer. I would help him chose the right children for Djapé and he would guarantee me a permanent place of study in the Conservatory.

But I did have one condition. If I felt a perfectly pure boy soprano would be destroyed on Djapé—and there were no others to take his place—the Pané and their human minions would be told that there were no boys in that group. Fewer children would go to Djapé, but those who would might actually have a chance at long-term musical (and personal) survival.

Felix agreed. He offered to take me to dinner to celebrate, but I refused.

Instead, I went to the blues club.

Jackson's band was at the end of a song. Instead of fading out as he usually did, Jackson started a completely different song. The band members looked at him, and then the percussionist grinned. He caught the syncopated beat. So did the bass player. The saxophonist did his own riff. The female singer grabbed a tambourine off the percussionist's table and tapped it against her hip on the off-beats.

I made my way to my usual table. The waitress was already setting down my C'cola when Jackson started singing *Playin' With My Friends*. I had heard it before, but never so energetically.

He was looking at me as he played, inviting me through the lyrics of the song to join them on stage. He even beckoned as he sang that I could pick any song I wanted to, so long as it was the blues.

I shook my head and sat down. He grinned at me, and stopped singing, playing a variation on the melody that I had never heard before. The entire band played without a singer for another fifteen minutes, various versions of the same song, with each instrument taking the melody—except the percussionist, who kept the same syncopated beat for the entire piece.

It was one of the most interesting—and welcoming—songs I had ever heard them do. By the end of it, I was clapping with the tambourine's beat like everyone else.

Finally Jackson eased out of the piece, followed by the bass. The percussion, tambourine, and trumpets finished it off with a flourish. Then everyone bowed, and threaded off the stage.

Jackson leaned his electric guitar against his stool. He climbed down into the audience as well, and startled me by coming to my table just as the steak-and-potato soup did. He ordered his own C'cola and a side of brisket.

"Why didn't you come up?" he asked. "I know you can sing."

"Not like that," I said. "Try as I might, I can't achieve a half-flatted note."

"Achieve it?" He raised his eyebrows. "You don't achieve notes. You sing them."

I shrugged. "I can't sing them either."

"Lemme hear you," he said. "Come on up to the stage."

I shook my head. "You have an audience."

"So?" He finished his C'cola as he stood, then set the glass on the table. "Come on."

"The last time I sang for anyone," I said, "I swallowed a note."

He laughed. "Hell, we're lucky if we even hit them."

That was true. I exhaled, and I stood reluctantly. My stomach had clenched, but to my surprise, my throat hadn't.

I climbed onto the stage and stood with my back to the small crowd. "What do you want me to try?"

"Something Pané," he said. "Something you're used to."

"No one here will like it," I said.

He nodded. "I want to hear it."

So I sang part of Tampini's Aria in E Major. I hit each note perfectly. They sounded too large in the club—ironic, I thought, considering the power of the blues band before me.

Jackson was grinning. "That's Pané music, huh?"

I nodded. "It's certainly not blues," I said.

"So sing for me," he said. "This line."

He sang the opening lines of the song that the band had just done. I sang as softly as I could, knowing how embarrassingly strange my pure high voice sounded.

"Keep going," he said, as I faded out. "You know the words."

And I did. Music stayed in my head. So I sang the opening lines of *Playin' With My Friends*, and he built a bridge underneath me with the electric guitar. Shivers were running down my spine.

I had always thought I was a windchime, but Jackson's song was making me into something else. As I sang, the other band members filed back on stage. They picked up in the middle as if they had never quit, only I was singing the melody. Jackson kept the bridge beneath me, and I kept my back to the audience. We played through all three verses and two renditions of the chorus, and then Jackson nodded at me to stop.

The band played twelve more bars and stopped as well. There was a moment of silence—the Pané version of a boo—and then someone clapped. Others followed. The applause was so steady and fierce that it threatened to overwhelm me.

I hadn't moved. Jackson had to set down his guitar and grab me by the shoulders, turning me around. The audience was on its feet, clapping and stomping and asking for more.

"But it's not the blues," I said to Jackson.

"Not the old-fashioned kind, that's true," he said. "This is something new. That's what they're applauding. Something different."

"Is that good?" I asked.

He extended a hand to the still applauding crowd. "What do you think?"

I thought I had never experienced a reaction that so moved me. The Pané's pleasure allowed me to keep my job. Here I had no job. I had experimented—and it had succeeded.

"Join us for another song?" he asked.

I started to shake my head, then changed my mind.

"Just one," I said, "and no more."

Five songs later, winded and covered in sweat, I staggered off the stage. The waitress brought me a fresh bowl of soup, some water, and another C'cola. The audience congratulated me and asked me when I was going to sing again.

Jackson grinned. "He'll be back," he kept promising.

"I can't," I said to him as he sat back down at my table. "I don't sing like you do. There's no music like this."



"Precisely," he said. "That's what's so wonderful about it."

"It doesn't follow any rules," I said.

"So there can't be perfection," he said.

I stared at him for a moment, stunned at what he just said. No perfection? Not even a little?

"We'll start slowly," he said. "One night a week. We'll put a sign out front, and call it the Pané Blues."

"Isn't that a contradiction?" I asked.

"Music loves dissonance," he said. "You just haven't learned that yet."

He was right. I hadn't learned dissonance. But I had a hunch I would.

And if my previous experiences on the Outpost were any example, I might actually come to love it.

"One night," I said, "and no more."

He grinned. He knew as well as I did that my vows that night weren't holding up. I wasn't sure I wanted them to.

I was acting without thinking, just like I had done in that concert in Tygher City, when my voice broke. My perfection broke. My life broke.

And became something new.

Something flawed.

Something better. ○

## NEXT ISSUE

OCTOBER/  
NOVEMBER  
DOUBLE  
ISSUE

No room here to be clever about our fabulous October/November double issue, so let's begin: **Ted Kosmatka** and **Michael Poore** contribute a literary tale of loss and personal redemption amidst the curious life cycle of an insect known as the "Blood Dauber"; **Heather Lindsley**, making her *Asimov's* debut, tells of the troubles experienced by time-traveling wage-slaves who answer the eternal question of just "Where the Time Goes"; **R. Garcia y Robertson** returns to his Burroughs-inspired milieu for a jaunt during "Wife Stealing Time"; **Damien Broderick** channels the inventive spirit of classic Zelazny in his tale "Flowers of Asphodel"; **Ian Creasey** describes the peculiar *weltschmerz* felt by a man who must leave his body behind to travel the stars in "Erosion"; **Robert Reed** contributes a sure SF award-nominee with his haunting "Before My Last Breath"; **William Barton** pens a thrilling interstellar adventure in his Standard ARM series, trawling "The Sea of Dreams"; **Christopher Barzak** shares the tragic story of "The Ghost Hunter's Beautiful Daughter"; **Elissa Malcohn** laments the discovery of a peculiar bit of "Flotsam"; and **Nancy Kress** shares her latest, "Deadly Sins."

OUR  
EXCITING  
FEATURES

We present a fascinating interview with physicist **Michio Kaku** in a brand new Thought Experiments column by **Mary Robinette Kowal**; **Robert Silverberg**, in Reflections, continues to offer insights into the invention of his popular Majipoor series in "Building Worlds II"; **Norman Spinrad** brings us "On Books" and **James Patrick Kelly** offers a new On the Net; plus an array of poetry you're sure to enjoy. Look for the October/November issue on sale at your newsstand on September 1, 2009.

## My Wars, and Welcome to Them

**H**arry Crosby will turn eighty-seven years old in 2009, Ghu willing. He doesn't write much these days, but his classic older work is receiving some renewed attention, thanks to fresh editions from Baen Books.

You say you've never heard of Harry Crosby before—or if you have, you know only of the Lost Generation poet by that name...? Good point. That's because our genre's Harry Crosby is better known as Christopher Anvil, his relatively famous pen name.

Baen has done five prior collections by Anvil, all mammoth omnibus volumes giving lots of reading pleasure for the buck, and the latest is no different: *War Games* (hardcover, \$22.00, 468 pages, ISBN 978-1-4165-5602-2) actually even contains a complete novel, *The Steel, the Mist, and the Blazing Sun* (1980). The rest of the military-themed book consists mostly of stories from *Astounding/Analog* and *Galaxy*, circa 1957-1972, with a couple from other zines and a few outliers from the eighties.

The first thing we notice about these stories is that Anvil is not concerned so much with actual combat—in the manner of so many other military SF writers—as he is with the overt and covert forces and patterns that might lead to warfare. Thus, he focuses on diplomacy, economics, technological imbalances and imperatives, politics, the media and personalities. This leads to a nice variety of tales, rather than a constant succession of blood'n'guts and battlefield glory.

The second thing we notice is that these stories are both time-bound and timeless. Given that the bulk of them derive from a period characterized by the bipolar conflict known as the Cold War

that dominated global thinking and strategy, there's a lot of American-Soviet byplay, some of which exhibits freshness of vision, while other parts fall prey to stereotypes. On the other hand, the interrelations among nations that Anvil itemizes exhibit a depressingly eternal accuracy. Here's a description of USA foreign policy toward dictatorships: "The Americans should be pumping in money, which the local dictator will stuff in Swiss bank accounts, and use to pay his guards to keep the people from killing him for not correcting all the trouble nature and three hundred years of bad management have piled onto their heads." That's from "Sorcerer's Apprentice," which dates from 1962. And a story like "Top Line," from 1982, with its plummeting Dow Jones and bankrupt Detroit automakers, looks positively prophetic.

The last thing one might notice about these stories—last, because they dazzle us by zipping along like maglev trains through a Disneyland of the jester's imagination—is how well they're constructed, and what literary tricks Anvil features in his bag. His prose is hardly ornate or "sophisticated," but it delivers the action in a punchy, succinct and captivating fashion. There's usually a single, well-conceived kernel of an idea at the heart of each story: for instance, the notion in "Uncalculated Risk" of a soil catalyst that has the same effect as Vonnegut's famous "ice-nine." (And Anvil's trope precedes Vonnegut's!) But Anvil will elaborate unexpectedly on the central conceit, usually in a kicker at the end. (Sometimes he uses the climax to restate the obvious, which is a less-charming habit.) And of course, as almost everyone knows, Anvil's chosen tone is humorous and sardonic, a mix of cautious cynicism and hopeful optimism. This voice alone lifts him out of the com-

mon herd of genre writers who choose to focus on how our sad species manages its aggressive impulses.

### He's a Star, Man

In retrospect, 1994 seems like an *annus mirabilis* for wild-eyed, offbeat comics at DC, the home of staid Supes. *Anima*, by Elizabeth Hand and Paul Witcover, was partway through its too-short 16-month run. Grant Morrison began *The Invisibles*. Rachel Pollack was doing *Doom Patrol*—

—and James Robinson launched *Starman*, with Tony Harris handling pencils, and Wade von Grawbadger on inks. This series is fondly remembered to this day for its brilliant mix of traditional heroics and postmodern revisionism. And while its whole eight-year run has already been “posthumously” collected in trade paperback form, it now receives the honor of hardcover reprinting in an eventual six volumes, the first of which is now available: *The Starman Omnibus: Volume 1* (DC, hardcover, \$49.99, 448 pages, ISBN 978-1401216993).

Robinson gave us a hero, Jack Knight, who was the youthful and irreverent son of his Golden Age ancestor, Ted Knight. While hardly “punk,” with his leather jacket and tattoos Jack was a thoroughly modern creature of the 1990s, by inclination and trade a dealer in pop collectibles, and a reluctant hero at best. He'd be in the middle of a fight scene and yet mentally distant, thinking of some mint Philco Predicta TV sets he'd just scored. His charming ambiguity and hipster humor was mixed with genuine nobility and selflessness. Robinson's dialogue was zesty, his pop culture references telling, and his characterizations sufficiently deep. Blending respect toward the great legacy of DC continuity with touches of revisionist dark'n'gritty, Robinson crafted adventures that evoked older sagas while still feeling fresh. What's not to admire?

This volume holds the first sixteen issues, and we get to admire Robinson's pacing. The first three issues establish

Jack's new career in the midst of change. The middle batch are some individual adventures that set up good supporting characters and history, and limn Jack growing more comfortable in his role. And the final five installments are what might be considered Jack's first mature outing, against a young woman named Nash.

As for the Harris-von Grawbadger artwork, it's pleasantly sketchy and impressionistic while at the same time reasonably old-school solid. Page compositions are nicely done, linear for the most part, with the occasional clever yet not flashy arrangement of panels and a welcome outburst now and then of one or two-page spreads. Their novel depictions of a classic character like Solomon Grundy establish that this is not your father's Starman.

Taken all in all, this series proves itself worthy of such prestige treatment, and future volumes will be hotly awaited.

The year 2008 saw the somewhat rocky return of Robinson to DC's stable of writers, as a scripter for the Superman family of titles. Let's hope that his unique voice is not deemed out of place in this current age—an age that could use a return to Starman's funky vibe.

### Timeslip Tween

Although the genuine first edition of Michael Marshall Smith's *The Servants* was issued in 2007, from the fine small press Earthling Publications, I missed seeing it until its 2008 reprinting from Eos (trade paper, \$14.95, 213 pages, ISBN 978-0-06-149416-1). I suspect most readers will encounter this particular edition as well, so we're all in the same boat of discovering a fine novel just a tad behind the curve.

Consider the fading seaside resort of Brighton, UK, in the wintry off-season. Hardly a venue of warmth and cheer. Now factor in being a lonely and aggrieved eleven-year-old in an intolerable family situation, and you have the stuff of genuine misery.

Our protagonist, Mark, has been up-

rooted from his beloved London, in the wake of his mother's remarriage to a fellow named David. While possibly a decent chap in any objective valuation, David is a thorn in Mark's side, since he's not Mark's beloved real Dad. And with Mark's dear Mum ailing from an unspecified illness that renders her less than her usual vital and supportive self, Mark feels alone and defenseless against the new rituals and routines that his stepdad seeks to impose. He attempts to compensate with some desultory skateboarding, but is generally at self-pitying and miserable loose ends.

Until, that is, he encounters the nameless ancient lady who dwells in the basement of David's Brighton home, a timeless lodger.

There's nothing overtly supernatural about the mild yet opinionated woman. She invites Mark in for tea and biscuits, and shows him a portion of the basement that used to be the Victorian-era servants' quarters. But when Mark, on a whim, revisits the abandoned quarters later on his own, he finds them populated with the living staff of another era: housekeeper, butler, scullery maid, et al.

At this point the reader might imagine Smith is setting up a cozy timeslip fantasy akin to Jack Finney's *Time and Again* (1970). But nothing proves further from the truth. Rather, we quickly find ourselves in creepy Margo Lanagan/PKD/Thomas Ligotti territory, with grim and surreal happenings and effects.

These revenants live in a decaying substandard reality: not the historical past, but rather a psychic plane intimately connected with the doings in the twenty-first century above. As Mark gains hard-earned wisdom through his interactions with the phantoms and his family, he'll begin to see that solving his own problems necessarily involves inserting himself into this buried Jungian drama.

Smith's skillful and subtle and sly modus operandi ensures that both the world of Mark's domestic dramas and the supernatural milieu belowground are deftly balanced and interlocked, with

equal credibility and prominence being given to each. There's nothing preachy or dogmatic or deterministic about the plot or the characters. Each individual is a mix of good and bad traits, heroic behaviors and flaws. The resolution of Mark's troubles is always problematical, producing a suspenseful atmosphere right up to the climax.

This book raises the perennial issue of whether any fiction with a youthful protagonist is, by default, to be seen primarily as a YA title. I tend to think not, citing such examples as *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) and *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951). Smith's book is further evidence in favor of this argument. It's certainly not being marketed as YA, and while I'm positive that any intelligent adolescent would find it eminently readable, it might actually be best appreciated by those of us who have already made our accommodations with the secret servants of the mind.

### Blak is Whyte, Whyte is Blak

The inversion of established hierarchies and orders is a primary tool of satire—and of science fiction. So any instance of satirical SF will almost certainly resort to such a strong and obvious narrative tactic. We get a clue that Bernardine Evaristo's fourth novel, *Blonde Roots* (Riverhead, hardcover, \$24.95, 269 pages, ISBN 978-1-59448-863-4), is embarked on such a mission right from its cover, which depicts a European upside-down world in the sky dropping a girl child down upon an African world solidly anchored rightside-up to the earth. (And note that the cover cleverly mimics the famous signature style of controversial black artist Kara Walker and her silhouettes.)

The cleverly punning, multi-level title is completely appropriate to Evaristo's scenario. She's going to depict a world where whites ("whytes") are slaves and blacks ("blaks") are slaveowners. It's an alternate history of sorts, but one that might demand a little accommodation from genre readers. For while Evaristo is

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ultimately meticulous in her world-building, she is also fabulistically and allegorically playful. She does not seek to justify in the scholastic fashion of a Harry Turtledove all the logical Jonbar Hinges of her uchronia, nor is she loath to employ unlikely anachronisms if they make a point. Her world is living in its own version of the twentieth century, yet it remains technologically at about an eighteenth century level. And while its cultural touchstones are mostly old-fashioned, there are such things as self-help books entitled *How to Motivate Your Workforce* and *Inheritance Tax for Dummies*—both ironically appropriate in context.

Even the continental masses of this world differ from ours, as we learn from a prefatory map. So there's simply no acceptable way—in SF terms—to get from our continuum to hers. Evaristo's universe is a self-contained rhetorical device.

But having said this much is not to diminish the book, merely to indicate its non-genre, literary heritage. Because Evaristo never forgets to build a convincing scenario and believable characters, engaged in a gripping plot, all while making her sometimes blunt, sometimes rapier-sharp points.

Our heroine, narrating in the first person except for "Book Two," when her master's voice intrudes, is one Doris Scagglethorpe, a whyte child living in primitive Europe, "the Gray Continent." Abducted by slavers, she is re-christened Oro and sent to the West Japanese Islands (think our West Indies) to be a companion to a spoiled blak girl. When that girl dies, Oro is transferred to the establishment of Bwana, aka Kaga Konata Katamba, whose fortunes come from the slave trade itself. The adult life of Doris/Oro then recapitulates in vigorous detail so many of the slave narratives and historical tidbits of our world that the final effect is one of deep immersion in this topsy-turvy world.

When Evaristo is not busy with her satirical recastings of archetypical events such as slave auctions and mas-

ter-slave sexual affairs (with transvalued players in the racial catbird seat), she is busy inverting all the standard esthetic, cultural, political, and religious stereotypes centering on race and that we take for granted. Big blak butts are the apex of attractiveness, and skinny whyte ones are appalling, and so forth. But there's no ultimate preference or privileging given to either race. Holding the whiphand, the blaks are as atrocious and cruel as our whites were. Deracinated and oppressed, the whytes are just as hapless and self-denying and messed-up as our blacks were. What remains is the dreadful institution of slavery itself as the eternal determiner of behavior.

Despite this general somewhat misanthropic condemnation, Evaristo also is careful to include many humanizing touches on both sides of the equation. Oro's feelings and thoughts, her disappointments and love affairs, emerge as the baseline of how to preserve one's dignity no matter what role chance dictates, making this novel a genuinely useful and fun thought experiment.

Curiously enough, another novel employing the same conceit as *Blonde Roots* is also current: *In the United States of Africa*, by Abdourahman A. Waberi. I don't have access to a copy as I write this review, but look forward to checking it out to see what unique angle of attack Waberi employs.

### Heinlein's Child

In his latest novel, *Saturn's Children* (Ace, hardcover, \$24.95, 336 pages, ISBN 978-0-441-01594-8), Charles Stross offers an affectionate homage to late-period Heinlein. As he has revealed in various interviews, Stross sought with this project to channel Grandmaster Heinlein—but only as if the elder writer had "been born forty-three years later," and thus imprinted on such late-twentieth-century tropes as cyberpunk and nanotech. Well, Stross does an uncanny pastiche, omitting any RAH-defects and admirably fulfilling his gameplan while still presenting us with a truly Strossian work.



# CLASSIFIED MARKETPLACE

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## BOOKS/PUBLICATIONS

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If the salient hallmark of genius is infinitely painstaking attention to details, then Stross certainly qualifies. There's not a sentence in this book that does not reflect a rethinking and recasting of speculative matter that has been lazily left unburnished by other writers.

Perhaps the first and most salient re-think is the grand backdrop for the story. Mankind is extinct, but his android children (with minds mapped directly from homo sapiens wetware) have inherited the solar system, and flourished—in many more niches than humanity ever could have comfortably occupied. There are rich aristo androids and worker androids and slave androids—many of them resembling their human Creators—and even xeniform androids (your hotel or spaceship are such). Our heroine is humaniform, although highly mutable with a body formed of “mechanocytes”: Freya Nakamichi-47. She and her sibs—descended from the ur-model dubbed Rhea—were created as geisha sex toys for humans—leaving them in something of an existential quandary, given the extinction of their client base. So Freya bums around, taking odd jobs

here and there. But when she goes to work as a courier for a fellow named Jeeves, she finds herself suddenly at the center of a vast set of conspirators and counter-conspirators, all angling for a shot at resurrecting the human species out of “pink goo.”

Right away, the savvy reader will see a dozen other allusive influences in this scenario, from Clifford Simak to John Varley to Richard Calder (not to mention throwaway asides to everyone from Howard Waldrop to Alfred Bester). But that's Stross's method and goal: in the words of Hemingway, “to beat dead men at their own game.” (Actually, come to think of it, that's literally what Freya's doing as well.) And god bless him, he mostly succeeds.

The ingenious thriller plot cleverly allows Freya to plausibly bop around the whole solar system, introducing us to all the exotic “steel beach” environments the androids have carved out. The action is nonstop, the speculations abundant, and the philosophizing vintage Heinlein. The whole comes together in a shapely package nearly as sexy as Freya.

Somewhere, Heinlein is proudly smiling. ○

# SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

**M**y pick events for us Asimovians in August are ConVersion, ConText, PiCon, ArmadilloCon — and of course WorldCon. Plan for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of convention(s), a sample of SF folk songs, and info on fanzines and clubs, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 5 months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard.—Erwin S. Strauss

## JULY 2009

- 31-Aug. 2—DiversiCon. For info, write: Box 8036, Minneapolis MN 55408. Or phone: (612) 721-5959 (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). (Web) [diversicon.org](http://diversicon.org). (E-mail) [info@diversicon.org](mailto:info@diversicon.org). Con will be held in: Minneapolis MN (if city omitted, same as in address) at a venue to be announced. Guests will include: Kay Kenyon. "Celebrating diversity" in SF/fantasy.
- 31-Aug. 2—ConVersion. [con-version.com](http://con-version.com). [info@con-version.com](mailto:info@con-version.com). Best Western, Ann Arbor MI.
- 31-Aug. 2—ConnectiCon. [connecticon.com](http://connecticon.com). Connecticut Convention Center, Hartford CT. Gaming, comics, pop culture.
- 31-Aug. 2—Chronicles: The Convergence. (316) 209-9225. [chronicle-gsa.com](http://chronicle-gsa.com). Wichita KS. Gaming, anime and SF.
- 31-Aug. 2—PulpFest. [pulpfest.com](http://pulpfest.com). Ramada Plaza, Columbus OH. Otto Penzler. Pulp magazines and old paperbacks.
- 31-Aug. 2—Costume College. [cocoregistrar@aol.com](mailto:cocoregistrar@aol.com). Airtel Plaza, Van Nuys CA. Masqueraders meet to swap know-how.
- 31-Aug. 2—Creation. (818) 409-0960. [creationent.com](http://creationent.com). Hilton, Parsippany NJ. Commercial media-oriented event.
- 31-Aug. 2—Otakuthon. [otakuthon.com](http://otakuthon.com). [info@otakuthon.com](mailto:info@otakuthon.com). Palais de Congrès, Montreal QE. Anime.

## AUGUST 2009

- 6-9—Creation. (818) 409-0960. [creationent.com](http://creationent.com). Hilton, Las Vegas NV. Commercial media-oriented event.
- 6-9—Wizard World. (954) 565-6588. Stephens Convention Center, Rosemont (Chicago) IL. Many guests. Huge comics event.
- 6-10—Anticipation. [anticipationsf.ca](http://anticipationsf.ca). Montreal QE. Gaiman, Hartwell, Doherty. WorldCon. US\$195+. Pay at the door.
- 7-9—Fandemonium. [fandemonium.org](http://fandemonium.org). Civic Center, Nampa ID. Jan-Scott Frazier, Steve Willhite, Ichidan, Reed Hawker.
- 7-9—IkasuCon. [ikasucon.org](http://ikasucon.org). Grand Wayne Convention Center, Ft. Wayne IN. Anime.
- 13-16—GenCon, 120 Lakeside Ave. #100, Seattle WA 98122. [gencon.com](http://gencon.com). Indianapolis IN. Gaming and anime. Huge.
- 14-16—ArmadilloCon, Box 26442, Austin TX 78755. (512) 477-6259. [armadillocon.org](http://armadillocon.org). S. Lynch, S. Martinere, J. Vinge.
- 14-16—PulpCon, Box 90424, Dayton OH 45490. Convention Center. Pulp magazines and old paperbacks.
- 15-16—Creation, 217 S. Kenwood, Glendale CA 91202. Contact as above. Wigwam Resort, Litchfield Park AZ. Media.
- 21-23—PiCon, Box 400, Sunderland MA 01375. [pi-con.org](http://pi-con.org). Crowne Plaza, Enfield CT (Hartford/Springfield). SF/fantasy.
- 21-23—Creation. Contact as above. Wyndham O'Hare, Rosemont (Chicago) IL. Commercial media-oriented event.
- 21-24—Gathering of the Gargoyles, Box 18972, Cleveland OH 44118. [gatheringofthegargoyles.com](http://gatheringofthegargoyles.com). Los Angeles CA.
- 28-30—ConText, Box 163391, Columbus OH 43216. (614) 868-8366. [contextsf.org](http://contextsf.org). Worthington OH. Written SF/fantasy.
- 28-30—BuboniCon, Box 37257, Albuquerque NM 87176. [bubonicon.com](http://bubonicon.com). Grand Airport Hotel. Cassutt, Vaughn, Charlifu.

## SEPTEMBER 2009

- 4-7—DragonCon, Box 16459, Atlanta GA 30321. (404) 909-0115. [dragoncon.org](http://dragoncon.org). Hyatt. Comics, media, SF. Huge event.
- 4-7—DiscWorldCon, c/o LepreCon, Box 26665, Tempe AZ 85285. (480) 945-6890. [nadwcon.org](http://nadwcon.org). Mission Palms. Pratchett.
- 11-13—Nan Desu Kan, 3140 Peoria, #K-262, Aurora CO 80014. [ndkdenver.org](http://ndkdenver.org). Marriott Tech Center, Denver CO. Anime.
- 11-13—ScareFest, 835 Porter Pl., Lexington KY 40508. (859) 233-4567. [thescarefest.com](http://thescarefest.com). Lexington Center. Horror.
- 18-20—FenCon, Box 701448, Dallas TX 75370. [fencon.org](http://fencon.org). Crowne Plaza. Bujold, the Musgraves, the Suttons, others.

## AUGUST 2010

- 5-8—North American SF Convention, c/o SAFE, 2144 B Ravenglass Pl., Raleigh NC 27612. [raleighnasfic2010.org](http://raleighnasfic2010.org).

## SEPTEMBER 2010

- 2-6—Aussiecon 4, GPO Box 1212, Melbourne VIC 3001, Australia. [aussiecon4.org.au](http://aussiecon4.org.au). World SF Convention. US\$175.

## AUGUST 2011

- 17-21—Reno Worldcon, Box 13278, Portland OR 97213. [rcfi.org](http://rcfi.org). Reno NV. Bidding unopposed for the 2011 WorldCon.

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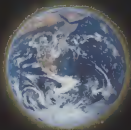
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